

Canada's social democratic NDP announces leadership contest following federal election debacle

Niles Niemuth
20 July 2025

Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP) announced earlier this month that it will be holding a seven month-long leadership contest that will officially kick off this September and conclude at the party's convention in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in March 2026. The aim of the lengthy campaign—already effectively under way—is to resuscitate the social-democratic party as a trap for the working class after its historic debacle in the April 28 federal election.

Already only the fourth-largest party in parliament, the NDP saw its share of the popular vote reduced by two-thirds and won just 7 seats, five less than needed to secure official party status. Having finished third in his own Vancouver-area riding, Jagmeet Singh, federal NDP leader since 2017, announced he was stepping down on election night.

The NDP's worst-ever result—by both seat total and vote share—in its more than 60-year history is the product of the party's evolution over the past four decades into an openly right-wing, bourgeois party virtually indistinguishable from its Liberal and Conservative rivals. Like social democratic parties in all of the major imperialist centres, the NDP abandoned from the 1980s onwards even the most limited association with reformist policies aimed at improving the social position of the working-class. The party served with its trade union sponsors as a key mechanism for suppressing the class struggle and propping up big business federal and Ontario Liberal governments committed to capitalist austerity and imperialist war.

Over the past decade, the NDP served as a pivotal source of political and parliamentary support for Justin Trudeau's Liberal government.

After the Liberals were reduced to a minority government in 2019, the NDP propped it up in parliament, backing major bailouts for corporations at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ruling class' profits-before-lives pandemic policy. For two-and-a-half years beginning in March 2022, the NDP kept the Liberals in power through a "confidence and supply" agreement. It was aimed, to use Singh's words, at creating "political stability" as the Trudeau government played a leading role in the US/NATO war on Russia, supported the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, and carried out a massive assault on the working class, banning strikes without even the democratic fig leaf of back-to-work legislation. Throughout this period, the NDP worked in tandem with its union allies to diffuse a major upsurge of the class struggle, which saw strikes sweep across all regions and sectors of the economy between late 2021 and December 2024.

The muzzling of the working class by the unions and the NDP's complicity in imposing savage right-wing policies of austerity and war facilitated a sharp shift to the right in bourgeois politics. With the far-right demagogue and Tory leader Pierre Poilievre riding high in the polls, and the fascist-minded US President Donald Trump threatening to take over Canada as the 51st state, the Liberals under former central banker Mark

Carney got the chance to posture as defenders of working people in the spring election campaign. This fraud was enabled by the unions and NDP, which continued to promote the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, while joining enthusiastically in the din of Canadian nationalist tub-thumping that Carney and the Liberals exploited. The end result was a sharp reversal in the polls, with the Liberals overturning a more than 20-percentage-point deficit just months before election day to win another minority government.

The election saw the NDP hemorrhage support to both the Liberals and Conservatives. The NDP lost seats in traditional working class strongholds, including a Tory "Blue Sweep" in Windsor, Ontario, the historic heart of the auto industry in Canada.

The NDP's role over the past four decades as a vicious opponent of the working class and an enforcer of right-wing, pro-corporate policies finds consummate expression in those who have led it. Singh, a lawyer and political nobody, emerged as party leader in 2017 with the full backing of the party apparatus and trade unions. Thomas Mulcair, his predecessor, was a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister who ran such a right-wing campaign during the 2015 election that Trudeau could pose as the real "progressive" alternative to hard-right Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Jack Layton, Mulcair's predecessor, oversaw the removal of even a token reference to socialism from the NDP's party program and was a key architect of the union/NDP/Liberal alliance which, since the late 1990s, has harnessed working-class opposition to the ruling-class onslaught on social and democratic rights to the big business Liberal Party.

The vast majority of workers no longer have any expectation that the NDP will fight for their interests. A poll by the Angus Reid Institute published in June found that just 13 percent of Canadians would definitely consider supporting the party in a future federal election. In other words, the party retains support only among a small minority, largely comprised of trade union bureaucrats and middle-class professionals, who see its rotten political record and ever more fervent embrace of identity politics as the defence of their own privileged social position.

The NDP leadership and its trade union sponsors intend to select as Singh's successor someone determined to continue along the same right-wing path with only the most cosmetic changes in policy and messaging. In a July 10 statement the NDP Federal Council announced that leadership candidates must submit a \$100,000 fee to be recognized, and declared that there will be "strong regulations" over third parties intervening in the race to combat the purported threat of "foreign interference." The onerous entry fee is more than triple the \$30,000 required in the 2017 race, and is intended to block so-called "frivolous"—i.e., more left-wing—candidates.

Further restricting the field—and exposing the party's contempt for democratic rights and promotion of right-wing identity politics—potential candidates must collect 500 signatures from party members, with at least

half from female-identified members, and 100 from “other equity-seeking groups,” which includes Indigenous, LGBTQ, those with disabilities and racial minorities.

In addition to the leadership race, the party has launched a “review and renewal” to consult with party members on the results of the 2025 election. “Our party has both an opportunity and a responsibility to reflect on its work—to critically assess the 2025 election campaign so we can build on what was successful and better understand what wasn’t, with the goal of coming back stronger and better for the next campaign,” declared former federal NDP candidate Emilie Taman, who will oversee this process.

Elements on the so-called “left” of the NDP pushed for a longer leadership race in order to refurbish the party’s role as a safety valve to trap leftward-moving workers within the suffocating framework of electoral politics. Libby Davies, a long-term NDP member of parliament who began her political career in Stalinist Communist Party-aligned activist groups in Vancouver, wrote a piece for the *Toronto Star* hailing the example of Democratic Party politician Zohran Mamdani. A member of the Democratic Socialists of America, Mamdani ran in the Democratic primary for New York mayor on a platform of free buses, a rent freeze and taxing the rich. While he attracted considerable support from workers and young people who find such promises appealing and are open to a socialist alternative, Mamdani and the DSA advanced this “left” posture in order to bind radicalized workers and youth to the Democratic Party—one of American imperialism’s twin parties of war and social reaction. Mamdani’s subsequent appeals for cooperation with billionaires and the political and business establishments underscore that his “socialism” poses no threat to the powers that be, but aims to provide their system of ruthless class exploitation, attacks on democratic and social rights, and imperialist war with a veneer of credibility.

Davies wrote of Mamdani, “His success is a potent reminder that there’s a hunger out there for what the NDP has to offer. But we need time to find the right person to lead us out of the desert and into the realm of political power and purpose.”

This statement combines a flat-out lie with political double-talk. Those attracted to Mamdani’s promises were motivated by left-wing and socialist convictions, the exact opposite of the NDP’s pro-capitalist and imperialist program. Regardless of who leads Canada’s social democrats, it is this program alone that “the NDP has to offer.” As for “the realm of political power and purpose,” the NDP has shown time and again that for the social democrats, this means holding the balance of power in parliament to prop up a Liberal government, while using their ties with the union bureaucracy outside of parliament to keep workers on a tight political leash.

While they have yet to officially announce their intention to stand in the leadership race, NDP MP Heather McPherson and film-maker, journalist and university professor Avi Lewis are being promoted in the media as the frontrunners. McPherson has represented an Edmonton, Alberta riding since 2019 and for the past four years has served as the NDP’s Foreign Affairs critic. McPherson has championed the war on Russia and, while shedding crocodile tears over the Gaza genocide, served as a leading member of the NDP caucus as it provided the Trudeau government with its parliamentary majority. She has repeatedly appeared at events sponsored by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress, including most recently in February at an event demanding an escalation of the war now in its third year.

Lewis has been floated as a potential “outsider” candidate who could reinvigorate the party. He has long been involved in NDP politics, having co-authored the 2016 Leap Manifesto with his wife, pseudo-left activist and author Naomi Klein. The document, which was largely ignored by the party establishment, was aimed at giving the NDP a left cover in relation to climate change and environmentalism, while maintaining its staunch

support for capitalism and Canadian nationalism. Far from an outsider, Lewis is the ultimate NDP insider. He is the son of former Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis and the grandson of David Lewis, who led the federal NDP from 1971-75 and was one of principals in forging the political alliance between the social-democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the union bureaucracy that led to the NDP’s launch in 1961.

Others on the list of potential candidates include: former MP Peter Julian, NDP House leader under Singh; Winnipeg MP Leah Gazan, who has made her name through Indigenous identity politics; Alexandre Boulerice, the lone NDP MP from Quebec; and Nathan Cullen, a former parliamentarian and current member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

The *Globe and Mail* has also floated International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Canada President Rob Ashton as a potential candidate. Ashton, president of the ILWU since 2016, proved his utility to the capitalist ruling class in 2023 by striking a militant pose as he bowed to Liberal government strike breaking efforts, sending 7,400 Canadian West Coast dockworkers back to work and forcing through a sellout contract after a powerful nearly two-week walkout.

Journalist and anti-war activist Yves Engler announced on July 7 that he had accepted the NDP Socialist Caucus’s nomination to run for party leader, and will do so under the slogan “Eco-socialism or Extinction.” In his campaign launch announcement Engler admitted his leadership bid is a longshot, adding that the “more realistic objective is to drive the debate away from the mushy middle.”

The so-called Socialist Caucus, led by Barry Weisleder, who doubles as head of the anti-Trotskyist Socialist Action, promotes the illusion that through such a pressure campaign the NDP can be taken back to its “socialist roots.” The Socialist Caucus has long been tolerated as a faction within the NDP which can be used to give the party a “left” tinge when it has been felt necessary. Its Pabloite perspective, epitomized in its selection of Engler as its candidate, is yet another trap for the working class. Notwithstanding his often sharp and valuable exposures of Canadian imperialism’s crimes around the world, Engler is a dyed-in-the-wool Canadian nationalist and opponent of the independent political mobilization of the working class. He calls for a more “independent” Canadian foreign policy, i.e., for Ottawa to assert its predatory interests more independently of Washington.

The NDP was founded not as a vehicle to fight for socialism, but as an instrument of the trade union bureaucracy, with the explicit purpose of diverting working-class militancy into safe parliamentary channels and attempts to “humanize” capitalist exploitation.

The party’s political traditions lie not in socialism but in social-democracy—a current that has consistently supported imperialist war, defended the capitalist state, and betrayed the working class since 1914. These are not fighters for the working class, let alone socialism, but rather “labour lieutenants of capital,” reliable enforcers of capitalist rule cloaked in progressive rhetoric.

The record of the party when in office underscores this role—most notoriously, the Rae NDP government in Ontario of the 1990s, which imposed sweeping austerity measures, wage freezes, and social spending cuts in service to Canadian capital.

The NDP is not a workers’ party, but a capitalist electoral apparatus rooted in the interests of the national labor bureaucracy and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie. It cannot be pressured into representing the working class because it was never intended to serve its interests and wage class struggle. Its function is to smother working-class militancy and preserve bourgeois rule by spreading illusions about democratic reform.

Workers and young people, including those initially enthused by Mamdani’s campaign, looking for a way to fight back against the assault on jobs and living standards by the ruling class, the destruction of social

services, and the turn to authoritarianism and war will not find any way forward within or in the environs of the NDP. The working class must make a decisive political break from the NDP, the union bureaucracy and all forms of national reformism. What is needed is the building of an independent, revolutionary, internationalist socialist party committed to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of workers' power. This perspective is embodied in the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), the Canadian section of the ICFI, which workers and youth must join and build to provide the necessary political leadership for the impending revolutionary struggles against capitalist barbarism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact