

Canada's NDP to pick new leader one year after election debacle

Keith Jones
27 March 2026

The NDP, Canada's social democratic party, will announce Sunday the outcome of a three-week-long membership vote to determine the party's next federal leader. Framing the contest is the existential crisis that confronts the NDP in the wake of last year's national election when it won just 6.3 percent of the vote and only 7 of the 343 House of Commons seats—far and away its worst-ever result.

The labour bureaucracy and the corporate media have sought to explain away the NDP's collapse and the polarization of the electorate behind the big business Liberals and Conservatives by pointing to the impact of Trump's annexation threats and trade war measures.

No doubt the return of the fascist, would-be dictator to the White House shuffled the electoral deck, beginning with the forced resignation of Justin Trudeau as prime minister. But the NDP's electoral debacle and its bleeding of support to both of the ruling class's traditional parties of national government was first and foremost the outcome of the role that the social democrats and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy have played in suppressing the class struggle as world capitalism has been roiled by systemic crisis.

For six years beginning in 2019, the NDP, with the support and at the behest of the trade unions, propped up successive Justin Trudeau-led minority Liberal governments that implemented capitalist austerity, rearmament and war. The unions, meanwhile, derailed the biggest strike wave in decades. As workers sought to mount a counter-offensive against surging prices and intensifying worker-exploitation, the unions systematically isolated their struggles, pushed through concessionary contracts, and enforced government antistrike laws and orders.

Eleven months after the April 28, 2025 federal election and under conditions where the Liberal government, reorganized under the former central banker Mark Carney, has lurched sharply further right, support for the NDP remains tepid. Most polls show its popular support hovering around 10 percent. Looking for greener pastures, NDP politicians continue to defect to the Liberals. These include Nunavut MP Lori Idlout, who earlier this month crossed over to the Carney Liberals, and Doly Begum, who last month resigned as Ontario NDP deputy leader and a Toronto-area MPP so that she can stand as the Liberal candidate in an upcoming federal by-election.

Nevertheless, within the ranks of the union bureaucracy and the middle-class pseudo-left there is much interest in rebranding and reviving this anemic, right-wing social-democratic party. This is because they fear that the mass opposition that will soon emerge to the Carney Liberal government—its support for the imperialist wars on Iran and Russia, diversion of society's resources to preparing for world war, and assault on workers' social and democratic rights—will escape their stultifying political grip.

There are five candidates to succeed Jagmeet Singh as federal NDP leader. But only three of them—Edmonton MP Heather McPherson, ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton and filmmaker, journalist, and academic Avi Lewis—have any chance of winning.

Radical journalist and antiwar activist Yves Engler, the nominee of the Pabloite-led Socialist Caucus, also fulfilled all the leadership-race entry requirements, including submitting a \$100,000 fee. However, an anonymous three-member NDP vetting committee arbitrarily excluded him from the race for his opposition to the NDP's full-throated support for the NATO-instigated Ukraine war and trenchant denunciations of the Gaza genocide.

McPherson, the lone sitting MP in the race, is widely considered to be the preferred candidate of the NDP apparatus. Ashton has been endorsed by several prominent union bureaucrats, including Canadian Labour Congress President Bea Bruske and the Canadian director of the United Steelworkers, Marty Warren.

Avi Lewis' attempt to rebrand the NDP as an opponent of the "billionaire class"

With Engler excluded from the race, Lewis has cast himself as the "left" candidate. He argues the NDP needs to be "bolder" and advance an "offer that is clearer" and names "the villains in our economy—the billionaire class."

Lewis cites the successful New York mayoral campaign of Zohran Mamdani, a "democratic socialist" embedded in the Democratic Party, one of the twin parties of US imperialism, as an inspiration and model. He advocates for new Crown Corporations and increased social spending to make up for "market failures" and decouple Canadian capitalism from the US economy. Specific policy proposals include: a "wealth tax" on the richest 1 percent and a "public option" to compete with the private sector in groceries, consumer banking and telecommunications (cell phone and internet plans.)

Lewis has deep connections to both the international pseudo-left and Canadian social democracy. The husband of the writer Naomi Klein, Lewis made a film in 2019 about the Green New Deal with Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, a Democratic Party congresswoman and like Mamdani a prominent leader of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Lewis' father, Stephen Lewis, was once the head of the Ontario NDP, and his grandfather, David Lewis, was the NDP's federal leader in the 1970s, including during the two-year period when the social democrats propped up a minority Liberal government headed by Pierre-Elliott Trudeau. Earlier as the federal secretary of the NDP's forerunner, the CCF, David Lewis was a point man in the Cold War purge of supporters of the Stalinist Communist Party and other revolutionary-minded workers from the trade unions.

Avi Lewis embraces this reactionary political legacy, calling it an "inheritance of struggle."

Campaign donor information supplied by the NDP indicates Lewis has

raised far more than his opponents and from many more contributors. This has led the press to suggest that he has a decided edge going into the last days of voting.

The NDP, the Liberal government, and “Team Canada”

Whatever their tactical disagreements, all of the candidates for the NDP leadership are staunch defenders of Canadian capitalism and its state, and inveterate opponents of class struggle. They are determined to contain and neuter social opposition by shackling it to the pro-employer trade unions, protests to the corporate elite and parliamentary-electoral politics.

None has repudiated the NDP’s role in propping up the Trudeau minority Liberal government, which has continued under Carney, as in last November’s budget vote.

All support “Team Canada,” the federal government-led, union and NDP-supported “national front” against Trump’s tariffs and threats. Team Canada serves to both pit Canadian workers in trade war against their US and overseas class brothers and sisters and to provide, behind a parade of Canadian nationalist flag-waving, political cover for the ruling class to push politics far to the right. Carney’s union and NDP-backed calls to strengthen Canadian “sovereignty” and economic “resilience” have invariably taken the form of massive rearmament, measures to strengthen Canada’s military-industrial base and steep cuts to public services and federal jobs.

Lewis has sought to appeal to antiwar sentiment, condemning the criminal, unprovoked US-Israeli attack on Iran, and Israel’s genocide and ethnic-cleansing in Gaza and the West Bank. But he backs the war against Russia in Ukraine, Canada’s arming of Ukraine and Ottawa’s working with the European imperialist powers to prevent any “peace deal” between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump made over the heads and at the expense of the predatory interests of the other NATO powers. Like the NDP as a whole, Lewis welcomed Carney’s speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, in which he advocated for Canada and other second-rank imperialist powers to ally so as to ensure that they secure a seat at the table in the imperialist drive to repartition the world through trade war, aggression and global war.

Heather McPherson and Rob Ashton

On becoming an NDP MP in 2019, McPherson offered to join the cabinet of the Liberal government, newly reduced to a minority, to provide it Western/Alberta “representation.” After the August 2021 election, she was named NDP foreign affairs critic and soon became one of the shrillest advocates of the Ukraine war, frequently joining with the far-right, Canadian state-sponsored Ukrainian Canadian Congress to demand the Liberal government take an even more belligerent stance.

McPherson boasts that she is a “big tent” New Democrat. In other words, she wants to hone to the corporate media-identified “centre,” appeal to disaffected Liberals, and eschew like the plague any policy proposals that go beyond the most meagre and miserly reforms. She and prominent supporters like former Alberta NDP cabinet minister Shannon Phillips have attacked Lewis for being “divisive.” They have taken particular issue with his climate change policies, which would cap further expansion of Alberta’s oil industry.

Ashton, who first came to national prominence for his role in sabotaging the 2023 strike and struggle of 7,400 British Columbia longshore workers,

has also attacked Lewis from the right.

Sections of the pseudo-left have nonetheless tried to promote the ILWU president as an authentic worker leader. In fact, he is nothing more than the typical right-wing, nationalist union bureaucrat.

In the name of “workers’ power,” he advocates union bureaucrats be given seats on the boards of capitalist corporations, as under Germany’s “co-determination” system, to boost corporate competitiveness and defend “Canadian” jobs.

“Workers need a real seat in the boardroom, not just at the bargaining table,” Ashton told the DSA-aligned *Jacobin*. “We can change regulations to make sure Canadian companies and workers benefit. Ships operating in Canadian waterways should be built in Canadian shipyards, houses and hospitals should use Canadian materials, and mines here should purchase Canadian-made equipment. If we rebuild our industries with workers at the table, we’ll create good jobs that last and an economy built by workers, for workers.”

Ashton is fully on board with the Carney Liberal government’s plans to massively expand Canada’s military-industrial base. “We need to ensure we have the capacity to protect our sovereignty. That means building Canadian-controlled defence capacity that doesn’t rely on American technology ... And it means investing not just in equipment, but in the women and men of the Canadian Armed Forces who do the work and carry the risk.”

Ashton’s promotion of protectionism, militarism, Canadian nationalism and the supposed common interests of Canadian workers and their capitalist exploiters is entirely in keeping with the foul role that he played in the 2023 BC ports strike. The strike quickly developed into a confrontation with the union and NDP-backed Trudeau Liberal government and all of corporate Canada. But Ashton, working closely with the Canadian Labour Congress, did everything to isolate it and confine it within the pro-employer collective bargaining system. Although US West Coast longshore workers, fellow members of the ILWU, were also working without contracts and many of them for the same giant shipping conglomerates as their striking Canadian brothers and sisters, Ashton and the US-based International leadership ensured the two struggles were hermetically sealed from one another.

Avi Lewis and the pseudo-left

Lewis has responded to right-wing criticisms by insisting that his differences with his fellow candidates are in fact small, that he stands for party unity and is eager to work with the NDP provincial governments in British Columbia and Manitoba, which are implementing austerity. Both provincial governments are keen supporters of Ottawa’s rearmament drive and close allies of the federal Liberal government.

Lewis has justified their pro-war, anti-worker policies by claiming that political dynamics require them to unite with pro-Liberal sections of the political and corporate establishment to prevent even more reactionary and rapacious representatives of capital coming to power. This is the very argument that the federal NDP and unions have invoked for years to justify propping up right-wing federal and Ontario Liberal governments and the corporatist, anti-worker union-NDP-Liberal alliance as a whole.

“In the realpolitik of the western provinces, particularly British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan,” Lewis told *Jacobin*, “they are fighting genuinely hard right forces—MAGA-like political cultures. They are looking across the trench at the extreme right. We support them and love them—and want them to be in government.”

The reality is that it is the political subordination of the working to the pro-war, pro-austerity parties of the so-called “progressive” wing of the

capitalist establishment that has made it possible for far-right demagogues from Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre and Trump to France's Le Pen to make a phony social appeal to economically distressed working people.

Much of the pseudo-left, including the Pabloite *International Viewpoint*, are promoting Lewis' candidacy, just as they have other maneuvers aimed at diverting growing anticapitalist sentiment among workers and youth into pressuring and reforming the phony "left" parties of the capitalist establishment, be it the "insurgencies" led by Jeremy Corbyn in Britain or Sanders and Mamdani in the US. All have ended in a debacle. In the name of preserving the unity of the Labour Party, Corbyn retreated at every point before the Blairite right wing, including in witch hunting his own supporters, paving the way for a Labour government under Keir Starmer whose policies are indistinguishable from those of its Tory predecessor. After bellowing against the "billionaire class," Sanders thrice corralled workers and youth behind the right-wing nominees of the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton in 2016, Joe Biden in 2020, and Kamala Harris in 2024. Since winning election last November, Mamdani has scampered to the right, jettisoning one policy pledge after another and twice meeting with Trump, with whom he has now formed an "alliance."

The NDP is a political vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy and other petty bourgeois layers that are entirely beholden to Canadian capitalism and its state. It serves as a mechanism for politically suppressing the working class. It cannot be transformed into an instrument for opposing imperialist war and capitalist austerity, let alone a means for workers to fight for socialism. On the contrary, workers will only be able to wage such struggles through a decisive political break with social democracy and its sponsors in the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses.

This requires the building of new organizations of class struggle, rank-and-file committees that refuse to subordinate workers' interests to the profit and geopolitical imperatives of Canadian imperialism. One of the principal tasks of these committees will be to fight to fuse the struggles of workers in Canada with the growing working class upsurge in the United States against Trump, his operation dictatorship and the Iran war. Above all, the fight against war, oligarchy and the threat of fascism and dictatorship requires the building of a mass revolutionary party of the working class to impart its struggles with an international-socialist program and strategy. That party is the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)