

“Left populist” Avi Lewis wins race to lead Canada’s social-democratic NDP

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Avi Lewis has been elected leader of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) on a pledge to revive Canada’s anemic social democratic party by moving “left” and “fighting the billionaire class.” A film-maker, academic and twice-failed NDP candidate, Lewis is a self-avowed “left populist” and proponent of “left” Canadian nationalism.

During the lengthy race to succeed Jagmeet Singh, Lewis cast himself as an opponent of the NDP’s right-wing leadership. He appealed to anti-war sentiment with trenchant condemnations of the Canadian government-backed US-Israeli war on Iran and the Gaza genocide. He touted himself as a “democratic socialist” who would “tax the rich” and establish “public,” i.e. Crown-owned, alternatives in several economic sectors, including groceries and telecommunications.

On this basis, Lewis won the membership vote for party leader decisively. On the first and only ballot, he captured 39,734 of the 70,930 votes cast, equating to 56 percent.

His nearest challenger was Heather McPherson, the preferred candidate of the party apparatus. She finished with 29.5 percent of the vote. The party’s foreign affairs critic, McPherson is a notorious anti-Russia war hawk, who champions rearmament and has close links to the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

Rob Ashton, the leader of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Canada, won 4,193 votes (5.9 percent), finishing fourth in a five-person race, despite having been endorsed by Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Bea Bruske and other senior union officials. Ashton ran on a right-wing economic nationalist program, boosting union participation on corporate boards and the rapid expansion of the defence sector to support “Canadian jobs.” Nevertheless, his derisory vote is an indication of the extent to which the union bureaucracy has turned away from the CLC-sponsored NDP to support the Liberals under Justin Trudeau and now Mark Carney, or even Pierre Poilievre and his far-right Conservatives.

Lewis’ left posturing is all hot air. He supports the US/NATO war on Russia in Ukraine and has emphasized his determination to work closely with the right-wing NDP governments in British Columbia and Manitoba, which are close allies of the Carney Liberal government and staunch supporters of Ottawa’s rearmament drive. In his acceptance speech, he praised both McPherson and Ashton and vowed to promote party “unity.”

Lewis does not repudiate the pivotal role that the NDP—with the unions’ full-throated support—has played since 2019 in propping up the minority federal Liberal governments as they have stamped to the right. He merely argues that the NDP should be more assertive when it holds the balance of power in parliament, i.e., do a better job of justifying its support for the big business Liberals with “left” posturing.

Lewis hails from the first family of Canadian social democracy. His father, Stephen Lewis, led the Ontario NDP for eight years in the 1970s and later served, under Brian Mulroney’s Tory government, as Canada’s UN ambassador. His grandfather, David Lewis, served as federal NDP leader from 1971 through 1975, and as federal secretary, chairman and national president of its predecessor, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The husband of the writer Naomi Klein, Avi Lewis also has deep connections with the pseudo-left in Canada and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which is a faction of the Democratic Party, one of the twin parties of US imperialism.

During the campaign, Lewis described his family background as representing “a history of struggle.” This tells one everything one needs to know about Lewis’ politics. The history of Canadian social democracy has never been one of *class* struggle, based on the independent political mobilization of the working class, but rather its suppression. The CCF/NDP has defended Canadian capitalism, striving to divert social opposition into efforts to “humanize” it through parliamentary reform and collective bargaining, while ruthlessly opposing revolutionary socialism.

The CCF was only founded in 1932, nearly two decades after the German Social Democrats (SPD) and all the other major European social democratic parties (with the exception of Lenin’s Bolsheviks) had supported their “own” bourgeoisies during World War I, and nearly 15 years after the SPD drowned the German Revolution of 1918-19 in blood. The CCF endorsed Canadian imperialism’s participation in World War II and hailed Canada’s entry into NATO. David Lewis, in his role as CCF federal secretary, worked closely with the union bureaucracy in the years immediately following World War II to purge Communist and other revolutionary-minded workers from the trade unions. This proved to be a major factor in the CIO-affiliated Canadian Congress of Labour becoming in 1949 the first labour federation to endorse the CCF in a national election.

The formation of the New Democratic Party, under the CLC’s sponsorship, as “Canada’s Labour Party” in 1961 was a maneuver aimed above all at creating a more effective mechanism for the labour bureaucracy to contain the class struggle. Its orientation was epitomized in its name, which eschewed any reference to the working class or socialism, and its proclaimed goal of uniting “progressives” of all parties. The NDP propped up Pearson’s minority Liberal governments of the 1960s. Then under David Lewis’ leadership, amid an unprecedented militant worker upsurge spearheaded by a wave of wildcat strikes, it backed Pierre-Elliott Trudeau’s 1972-74 minority government.

Like social-democratic parties the world over, the NDP has over the past four decades emerged as a right-wing, anti-worker party virtually indistinguishable from its Liberal and Conservative rivals. Its mild reformist program was junked long ago.

Lewis’ “family history of struggle”

The party of “the 99 percent”

Lewis aims to rebrand the NDP, with “left populist” rhetoric, so as to resuscitate illusions in its failed national-reformist program, and chain leftward-moving workers and young people to Canadian social democracy, under conditions of what he recognizes to be a mounting crisis of global capitalism. He himself invokes the threat of fascism, the shipwreck of “neo-liberalism” and a looming climate-change driven environmental catastrophe.

As he put it at a Monday press conference, “Left-wing populists believe that capitalism concentrates wealth and power in the fewest hands, and we need policies and a response that actually responds to the needs of the 99 percent of us.”

With his reference to the “99 percent,” Lewis clearly walks in the footsteps of political charlatans like Bernie Sanders and the DSA’s Zohran Mamdani. This amorphous category, promoted by the proponents of pseudo-left politics, dissolves the working class into a broad milieu encompassing the privileged middle class and excluding only the very wealthiest sections of the ruling elite. It is tailor-made to pursue the material interests of the upper-middle class—trade union bureaucrats, academics, and better-off professionals—whose incomes and wealth fall within the richest 10 percent of Canadian society. This layer—the “next 9 percent”—resents the political and economic power of the capitalist oligarchy, and would like to see it more broadly shared within the top ten percent. But Lewis, like Sanders and Mamdani, is above all intent on preserving the existing capitalist social and political order. He is bitterly hostile to any independent political movement of the working class.

According to the World Inequality 2026 report, the top 10 percent of Canadians own over 60 percent of all wealth, which is greater than four times more than the 13 percent owned by the poorest half of the population. In terms of income distribution, the top 10 percent gobbles up over a third of all income, compared to just 16 percent for the poorest 50 percent.

Lewis sought in his acceptance speech last Sunday to give the impression that he would significantly alter the gaping levels of social inequality that have risen steadily over recent decades, irrespective of which party has held power at the federal level or in the provinces. “This is more than a rigged economy, it is a war on working people,” he declared. “It is immoral, it is un-Canadian and we cannot let it stand.” He pledged a “nation-building” exercise to strengthen the “care economy.”

In reality, glaring social inequality, monopoly and the domination of economic and political life by a super-wealthy capitalist elite have been at the heart of Canadian capitalism, since it rapidly expanded following Confederation and the dispossession of the native people of the West. They are as “Canadian” as maple syrup.

Today, millions of people rely regularly on food banks, and at least as many work in precarious jobs with no protection. To pay for war and the enrichment of the oligarchy, NDP-backed Liberal governments have cut health care, education, and other public services and social supports to the bone. Lewis’ clumsy attempt to present these organic features of Canadian capitalism as foreign imports is inseparable from his “left” Canadian nationalist perspective, which has been a hallmark of the petty-bourgeois “left” in Canada for well over 50 years. Portraying Canada as a “gentler” and “kinder” society than the rapacious Dollar Republic south of the 49th parallel, these forces work tirelessly to split Canadian workers from their natural allies in the working class of the US, Mexico, and internationally with fairy tales about “common Canadian values.” That Lewis sees himself firmly in this tradition was underlined by his positive reference in an interview with the DSA-aligned *Jacobin* to the “Waffle” faction in the NDP during the early 1970s, which advocated a “left” nationalist perspective bound up with more “independence” from

American imperialism and was expelled by the party leadership.

This foul Canadian nationalist tradition has nothing to offer the working class. This fact has been powerfully demonstrated over the past 18 months, during which the trade unions and NDP have rallied round the ruling class’ “Team Canada” response to Trump’s trade war and annexation threats. While the union bureaucracies and NDP have been waving the Maple Leaf and preaching “national unity,” the ruling class, led by the Carney Liberal government, has dramatically intensified its class war assault. It has poured hundreds of billions into rearmament and war, implemented a new austerity drive, and eviscerated workers’ democratic rights, including the right to strike.

Outrage from the NDP right wing and sections of the corporate media

Although Lewis’ “left” nationalist program is aimed at defending Canadian capitalism and blocking the emergence of a mass movement of the working class oriented to international unity with their class brothers and sisters in the US, the new NDP leader has come under vicious attack from the party’s right wing. Immediately after Lewis was named federal NDP leader, Alberta NDP leader Naheed Nenshi took to social media to declare that Lewis’ victory was “not in the interests of Alberta.” Nenshi, who wants to protect and grow the profits of Alberta’s oil barons, went on to emphasize that the Alberta NDP is organizationally distinct from the federal party since last year. “We are a big tent and welcome the support of people who vote for every federal party,” said Nenshi. A similar stance was struck by NDP Saskatchewan leader Carla Beck. She said Lewis’ energy policy would jeopardize “\$13.6 billion in economic activity annually in Saskatchewan.” Lewis responded by stressing that his “door is open” to cooperation with the provincial leaders.

The trade union bureaucracy is also far from enamoured with the new NDP leader. Following a meeting with Lewis, CLC President Bruske issued a statement that provided about as little support as she could have without triggering an open crisis. She did not even congratulate Lewis, but merely noted that they had a “great discussion, and I look forward to seeing him in action.”

Lewis has come under fire from the financial oligarchy and its media mouthpieces. Long-time *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Braid titled his reaction to the outcome of the NDP leadership race “Under new leader Avi Lewis, federal NDP looks more communist than social democratic.”

The *Globe and Mail*, meanwhile, published a column accusing the party of having an “antisemitism problem.” This spurious lie is based on Lewis’ denunciations of Israel for committing genocide in Gaza, a description supported by the United Nations and numerous international organizations, and his referencing his great-grandfather’s participation in the anti-Zionist socialist-worker organization, the Jewish Bund. Since the genocide began in 2023, the NDP has joined the rest of the political establishment in persecuting anti-genocide activists. This included kicking Sarah Jama out of the party’s Ontario legislative caucus.

The hostile reaction from big business reflects outrage within ruling circles over Lewis’ tepid policy agenda, which does not even rise to the modest reforms advocated by the social democrats in an earlier period. He plans, among other things, to tax inheritances over \$5 million, invest \$50 billion annually in green energy projects, establish a publicly run chain of grocery stores, consider capital gains as employment income for tax purposes, and impose a wealth tax on the top 1 percent.

Even these policies, which would leave rampant social inequality and capitalist exploitation virtually untouched, are too much for the financial oligarchy and its mouthpieces to bear. Their attacks on Lewis reflect the

fact that under conditions of a deepening capitalist crisis, no check, however minuscule, on their accumulation of wealth and redirection of society's resources to the military for waging war in pursuit of Canadian imperialist interests can be tolerated.

Predictably, representatives of the middle-class pseudo-left have weighed in with enthusiastic statements about the new opportunities opened up by Lewis' leadership. Radical journalist Yves Engler, who met all of the conditions necessary to run for leadership but was arbitrarily excluded by the party top brass, urged "leftist supporters" to "pressure" Lewis to ensure "he upends the party bureaucracy while promoting socialist, internationalist and anti-ecocide policies."

This is a bankrupt strategy that pseudo-left forces around the world have promoted time and again. It recalls the "left" cheerleaders in Britain of Jeremy Corbyn, who was swept into the leadership of the Labour Party with the backing of hundreds of thousands in 2015 on a program that sounded far more radical than Lewis'. Britain's pseudo-left trumpeted the prospects of a new foreign policy more "independent" of the US and even suggested Corbyn could lead the country towards socialism through the Labour Party, a bourgeois party and staunch defender of British imperialism of more than a century's standing. Yet during his leadership, Corbyn responded not to the "pressure" from groups like the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Appeal (since rebranded as the Revolutionary Communist Party), but the Blairite right. He junked his purported opposition to British involvement in wars of aggression with his tacit approval of Labour's support for Britain's participation in the war in Syria, endorsed the country's maintenance of nuclear weapons, and called on Labour local councils to enforce ruthless austerity in partnership with the Tory government. What's more, Corbyn stood idly by as his supporters were systematically persecuted and expelled from the party on bogus "antisemitism" charges. He then handed the leadership over to the Blairite Keir Starmer, who now heads a government that is continuing austerity, prioritizes close relations with Trump, and has augmented Britain's major role in the war on Russia.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that workers can only wage a struggle against capitalist austerity, inequality, and imperialist war through a decisive political break with the NDP and all political forces who claim it is possible to "reform" it or push it to the left. Workers need new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees, to lead a rebellion against the nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucracies, who work hand in glove with the NDP to suppress the class struggle. These organizations must intensify the class struggle on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, uniting workers in Canada, the US, and Mexico in the fight for decent-paying, secure jobs for all, the defence of democratic and social rights, and an end to imperialist war and barbarism. The most urgent task to realize this perspective is the building of the SEP as the revolutionary leadership required by the working class in the struggles ahead.



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