

Why is Canada's pseudo-left rallying behind NDP leadership candidate Niki Ashton?

By Roger Jordan
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As the New Democratic Party (NDP) leadership race limps to its conclusion, Canada's pseudo-left has rallied behind the candidacy of Manitoba MP Niki Ashton, portraying it as a golden opportunity to energize and radicalize this right-wing social-democratic party.

Fightback and Socialist Action, which both function as loyal factions within the NDP, have officially endorsed Ashton. The International Socialists and the US-based *Jacobin* magazine have boosted Ashton's candidacy by devoting substantial space on their websites to laudatory interviews with her.

The pseudo-left is urging Ashton model herself after Bernie Sanders, the failed candidate for the 2016 US Democratic Party presidential nomination, and British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, with some explicitly appealing to her to become "Canada's Corbyn."

Sanders and Corbyn have employed "left" and socialist rhetoric to keep workers and young people trapped within parties of the political establishment, i.e., parties respectively of US and British imperialism.

Having won 13 million votes by pledging to lead a "political revolution," Sanders endorsed Hillary Clinton, the preferred candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. Corbyn has declared his guiding principle to be upholding "unity" with Labour's Blairite right wing and, toward that end, has ordered Labour municipal councils to impose brutal Conservative government-dictated cuts and acquiesced to Labour MPs authorizing Britain to wage war in Syria and acquire a new fleet of nuclear-armed submarines.

In urging Ashton to play a like role, Canada's pseudo-left groups are laying bare their own determination to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class. The pseudo-left hope that Ashton, like Sanders and Corbyn, can restrain burgeoning popular opposition to war and social inequality within the straitjacket of electoral politics and under the leadership of the NDP and trade union bureaucracy. They justify this reactionary perspective with preposterous claims that these pro-capitalist organizations can be pressured to the "left" and can even become vehicles for advancing the struggle for socialism.

Ashton's credentials to play the role of a "left" within the right-wing, pro-war NDP are, to say the least, thin. Elected to parliament for the first time in 2008, she was a member of the party leadership under Thomas Mulcair, after running against him in the 2012 party leadership race. She is the "proud" daughter of Steve Ashton, who served as a cabinet minister in the Manitoba NDP governments of Gary Doer and Greg Selinger, which ruled the province from 1999 to 2016 and implemented big business's austerity agenda, slashing public and social services while reducing corporate taxes.

Contrary to the absurd claims of Socialist Action that the NDP is a "mass, labour-based" party that "remains viable as a potential leftist challenger to capitalist austerity, climate injustice, social inequality, racism, sexism and war," the NDP has been dominated since its formation more than a half-century ago by anti-communist trade union bureaucrats

and privileged sections of the middle class. Like other social-democratic parties around the world, the NDP long renounced even its traditional reform program in favor of austerity and war and is rightly seen by the vast majority of workers as little different from its Liberal and Conservative competitors.

Currently, the NDP is running at below 20 percent in the polls, its support having plunged after it waged a Harper-lite election campaign in 2015, which included pledges to balanced budgets, no tax increases for the richest 1 percent of Canadians, near-record low corporate tax rates, and increased military spending.

The NDP's trade union allies, which helped to elect the big business Liberals in 2015 with their "Anybody but Harper campaign," are likewise reviled after decades of suppressing the class struggle and enforcing concessions on workers in every industry.

Workers and young people in Canada and internationally are increasingly hostile to a political set-up they perceive to be indifferent and opposed to them, and are seeking a means to assert their independent class interests. In May, 175,000 Quebec construction workers mounted a week-long anti-concessions strike until the unions ordered them to obey a back-to-work law. Swissport baggage handlers at Toronto's Pearson Airport are now in their second month of job action, although the Teamsters union is doing everything it can to isolate their strike and shut it down.

But the pseudo-left are determined to ensure workers remain bound hand and foot to the NDP and the unions.

The pseudo left's silence on imperialist war

The pseudo-left groups have conspired with the NDP leadership to keep the issue of war almost entirely out of the leadership campaign. Yet the danger of a catastrophic imperialist war has never been so great since the Cold War was at its height. US imperialism, the Canadian bourgeoisie's closest ally since the Second World War, is aggressively provoking conflicts in every part of the world, from Korea, to Syria, to Eastern Europe, in a desperate bid to offset its declining economic power through the ruthless deployment of military force.

Having joined in almost all of the American-led wars of aggression over the past quarter century, Canada is fully implicated in this reckless agenda. The Trudeau government has sent Canadian troops to lead one of NATO's battalions in Eastern Europe to encircle Russia, and aligned itself with the Trump administration's threat to rain down "fire and fury" on North Korea.

The Liberal government's new defence policy released in June commits the government to hike military spending by 70 percent over the next decade, procure new fleets of warships and fighter jets, and strengthen Canada's military partnership with US imperialism through the modernization of the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) command. The latter is likely to include Canada's participation in US ballistic missile defence—a program, its name notwithstanding, aimed at

making nuclear war “winnable.”

The NDP leadership contenders have been conspicuously silent on the North Korea crisis and have had next to nothing to say on the Liberals’ defence policy, not to mention the war danger more generally.

During lengthy interviews with Ashton, both Fightback and the IS refrained from interrogating her about the NDP’s and her own personal record of supporting Canadian imperialism’s military interventions. This is because they knew that to do so would undermine their efforts to promote her as a “progressive,” even quasi-socialist prospective NDP leader.

Ashton, like the entire NDP parliamentary caucus, voted twice in 2011 for Canada’s participation in NATO’s bombardment of Libya, an act of imperialist aggression that led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Libyans, the lynch-mob murder of Muammar Gaddafi, and the incitement of a bloody civil war. The only time Ashton was asked about her 2011 votes, she disingenuously told radical journalist Yves Engler that she could not remember how she voted. (See: “The Canadian NDP and the Libyan war: Niki Ashton is a liar”).

Confronted with the *World Socialist Web Site’s* exposure of Ashton’s pro-war record and mendacity, Fightback supporters sprang to her defence. One Montreal Fightback leader chastised us for drawing attention to “Niki’s error” and argued it was irrelevant in the current campaign, while another sought to square the circle by cynically trumpeting Fightback’s “anti-imperialist” credentials before declaring their full-throated support for Ashton.

Ashton has repeatedly boasted that she is one of the “Jack Layton generation,” i.e., someone who became involved in the NDP under the leadership of a man who insisted the NDP demonstrate its “maturity” by embracing the US-led NATO alliance, which since the 1990s has been involved in wars that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and who in December 2008 agreed to join the big business Liberals in a coalition government committed to waging war in Afghanistan, a \$50 billion corporate tax cut, and “fiscal responsibility” (i.e., austerity).

The pseudo-left’s indifference to Ashton’s pro-war record is not just or even primarily a question of their complacency—although, to be sure, groups like the International Socialists and Socialist Action vastly underestimate the capitalist crisis and the war danger.

The pseudo-left in Canada and internationally has emerged over the past quarter-century as an increasingly explicit pro-war and pro-imperialist tendency, as exemplified by their labelling of various US regime-change operations from Libya and Syria to the Ukraine as “revolutions” and/or democratizing movements.

Whilst they occasionally mouth socialist phrases, the pseudo-left groups are led by representatives of, and oriented to, the upper-middle class—to the trade union bureaucracy and the identity politics NGOs who hope to get a “fair share” of capitalism’s managerial and professional jobs through affirmative action. In tandem with these wealthy and egotistical layers, the pseudo-left has moved sharply to the right, integrating themselves ever more completely into establishment politics, and emerging as a new constituency for “human rights” imperialism.

This layer is very much at home in the NDP, which has provided a “humanitarian” imperialist cover for every war involving Canada over the past two decades. It endorsed Canada’s participation in the NATO air war against Yugoslavia, backed the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, and has thrown its weight behind the anti-Russia stance of successive Canadian governments. The NDP has also supported Canada’s participation in the US-led Iraq-Syria war coalition and the deployment of Canadian forces to Iraq, merely advising that they focus on “humanitarian” operations.

Defending Canadian capitalism

Ashton’s pro-capitalist agenda is no less clear cut on the domestic front. To describe her proposed “reforms” as meagre would be generous. She is pledging to introduce free post-secondary education and increase corporate taxes to the level to which they were slashed by Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin. In a few very narrowly defined areas, she and her pseudo-left foot soldiers are advocating government intervention, which they dishonestly portray as “public ownership.” One of these is the creation of a crown corporation she suggests be called “Green Canada,” which would funnel government funds to publicly and privately run environmental projects. Another is a proposal for government-owned Canada Post to become involved in postal banking. This is a longstanding demand of the trade union bureaucracy, one it has touted to provide itself with a fig leaf for the imposition of a succession of concessionary contracts on postal workers.

Such modest proposals, some of which would be embraced by sections of the ruling elite, have not hindered the pseudo-left from trying to breathe life into the corpse of reformist, social-democratic parliamentary politics. In claiming that its endorsement of Ashton is “critical,” Fightback advanced as its principal criticism of her campaign that she calls herself a “progressive” in her speeches rather than following Sanders’ example and falsely claiming to be a “socialist.”

Ashton’s real attitude to capitalism and the decades-long assault on the working class is revealed by her uncritical adulation of Syriza. Ashton, whose first language is Greek on account of her mother’s heritage, sent enthusiastic greetings to Syriza’s 2013 congress, describing the party as an “inspiration.” She has repeatedly praised Syriza during her current leadership campaign, while avoiding any comment on Syriza’s despicable role in betraying the anti-austerity sentiments it exploited to gain power in January 2015.

Utterly opposed to the mobilization of the Greek and European working class against austerity and the big-business European Union, Syriza agreed just six months after coming to office to impose a package of EU and European Bank austerity measures that went far beyond anything implemented by its conservative and PASOK predecessors, even though the vast majority of Greek workers had just voted against such policies in a referendum.

Ashton’s pseudo-left cheerleaders hope to create the conditions where the NDP can similarly exploit growing anti-establishment and anti-capitalist sentiment and assume responsibility for managing the increasingly crisis-ridden capitalist order.

In its endorsement of Ashton, the Socialist Action-led “Socialist Caucus” of the NDP appealed to her to adopt more of Corbyn’s platform from his 2015 campaign to win the British Labour Party leadership. Needless to say, the Socialist Caucus neglects to inform its readers that this platform has been unceremoniously junked by Corbyn as he has sought to appease the Blairite right and convince the British ruling class he can be trusted with the reins of power.

Socialist Caucus revealed the real concerns motivating its friendly criticisms of Ashton when, after bemoaning the fact that her campaign has not “created an open, bold, militant movement of the kind that brought 200,000 new members into (the British Labour Party),” it urged her to follow Corbyn’s lead and give “activists” from the pseudo-left groups leadership roles in her campaign.

Unlike Corbyn, who included representatives from Britain’s Socialist Action and Left Unity and leading trade union bureaucrats in his campaign team, Ashton, complained the Socialist Caucus, is relying on personnel with few connections to the “labour movement.”

All of Socialist Action’s efforts and those of the pseudo-left more broadly boil down to creating a new trap for the working class by encouraging hundreds of thousands to take Ashton’s “left” rhetoric for good coin and join the NDP, a pro-capitalist and pro-war party. Moreover, the pseudo-left groups want Ashton to entrust them with providing the

bait to lure the workers in, by including their leading representatives in her campaign organization and, they hope, giving them lucrative posts in her future NDP leadership team.

Thus, under conditions of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s, they help perpetuate the fatal illusion that it is possible to capture the capitalist state and use it to implement policies in the interests of the workers through parliamentary reforms, a perspective which has time and again proven disastrous for the working class and contradicts everything leading Marxists have fought for over the past 150 years.

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