

Canada's New Democrats prop up pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals

By Roger Jordan
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Canada's New Democratic Party has once again ensured that Justin Trudeau's minority government remains in power, by lending its support in a parliamentary confidence vote last week to the Liberals' latest coronavirus spending bill.

The NDP's vote to prop up the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals underscores its support for the measures the Trudeau government has taken to rescue the fortunes of the ruling elite amid the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s, while forcing working people to scrape by on rations.

The support the NDP and Bloc Quebecois gave for \$87 billion in coronavirus spending, only \$6 billion of which was in fact new money, meant that no formal votes had to be cast last Wednesday on two separate bills. Instead, the Liberals sailed through their first confidence vote since normal sittings of the House of Commons were suspended due to COVID-19 last March.

During this three-month period, the Trudeau government has overseen an unprecedented transfer of over \$650 billion to major corporations, the big banks and financial markets. At the same time, with the support of the trade union bureaucracy and NDP, it instituted a makeshift, temporary program—the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)—to provide laid-off workers with a mere \$2,000 per month for a maximum of 16 weeks.

The Liberals' decision to extend CERB eligibility for a further eight weeks was touted by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh in justifying his party's support for the government. In reality, the government had virtually no other choice but to adopt such a measure under conditions in which the catastrophic economic collapse triggered by the pandemic continues to force around 7 million Canadians to claim CERB benefits. Even big business leaders spoke out in favor of an extension, because they recognized that allowing the CERB to abruptly expire for millions of workers in early July would have led to widespread economic desperation and could have potentially fueled a social explosion that could not easily be controlled.

As it is, the brief respite given to workers who began claiming CERB in March will not even tide them over beyond the end of August. By then, the Liberals aim to have passed into law more stringent requirements for receiving government

aid so as to intensify the ruling elite's criminal back to work drive. These include a requirement that workers resume working when asked to do so by their employer or when provided a "reasonable" job offer. If they fail to do so, according to the government's draft legislation referred to as Bill 17, they could face massive fines and, should they be found to have committed "fraud," prison time.

The federal government's intimidating threats, made at the behest of the corporate elite, have emboldened the hard-right provincial governments in Quebec and Ontario to announce the reopening of additional economic sectors, putting tens of thousands more workers and their families at risk.

The Trudeau government is only in a position to act so ruthlessly in the interests of corporate Canada because it knows it can count on the full backing of the trade unions and NDP. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, their chief tasks have been to suppress and sabotage all workers' struggles, including over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), and provide "progressive" cover for the Liberals' bailout of the super-rich.

The first task was accomplished by the education trade unions in Ontario, which one by one concluded rotten concessions-laden deals with the Ford government just weeks after a strike by over 200,000 teachers had shaken the province and galvanized mass working class support. The Canadian Union of Public Employees and various other unions representing health care workers have blocked the widespread anger among medical staff over the chronic lack of PPE from developing into coordinated protest action. The failure of the Trudeau Liberals and their provincial counterparts to supply adequate protective equipment has had catastrophic consequences, with over 10,000 health care workers being infected across Canada.

To cover up the brutal class character of Canadian capitalism's response to the pandemic, the unions and NDP have maintained a deafening silence on the \$650 billion the Trudeau government, Bank of Canada and other state institutions have funneled into the banks and financial markets to safeguard the investments of the rich and super-rich.

Instead, they have devoted their energies to praising the Trudeau Liberals for their purported generosity to workers as exemplified by the CERB. Even though the emergency benefit

has vastly exceeded initial government projections—attesting to the breadth of the crisis facing working people—total spending on the program in early June amounted to \$60 billion, a mere fraction of the vast sums made available to big business and the banks.

The unions and NDP have also proved to be crucial allies of the Trudeau government, big business, and the hard-right premiers of Ontario, Quebec and Alberta in enforcing the back-to-work campaign. After forming what Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff called a “collaborative front” with employers’ organizations, the unions signed and co-authored a series of joint statements and documents with business organizations to lay the groundwork to force hundreds of thousands of workers back into unsafe workplaces.

At the Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union forced 2,000 workers to return to work even though almost 1,000 COVID-19 cases and three deaths had been linked to the plant. Summing up the criminal indifference of the union bureaucracy towards workers’ lives, the local UFCW president denounced job action to protest the life-threatening conditions as “not legal,” under the pro-employer, state-designed collective-bargaining regime the unions uphold and enforce.

In Ontario, Unifor worked hand in glove with the Detroit Three automakers to reopen auto plants as soon as possible without putting in place adequate safety precautions. The Quebec Federation of Labour hailed Premier François Legault’s criminal plan to reopen the economy as the pandemic continued to rage as an “economic recovery plan.”

Singh and the NDP then moved to consolidate the political arm of this corporatist conspiracy against the working class by reaching a deal with the Liberals in late May to continue the suspension of normal parliamentary sessions until September. This deal means that the minority government can table and pass legislation without it receiving the same level of parliamentary scrutiny and public debate. Details are hammered out in backroom manoeuvres among the parties, as was the case with the latest confidence vote.

To justify this reactionary move, Singh claimed to have secured a deal that would provide 10 days of paid sick leave for all workers. This is a fraud. Trudeau has done nothing to provide paid sick leave for workers regulated by federal labour law, and the provinces, under whose jurisdiction 90 percent of all workers in Canada fall, have almost uniformly trashed the idea.

The New Democrats’ support for the Liberals proves once again that they are a key component of the bourgeois political establishment. Over the past three decades, the NDP has backed virtually every US imperialist-led war in which Canada has participated, enforced austerity and privatizations when in power at the provincial level, and promoted the lie that the Liberals offer a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives.

Having missed out on their previous opportunity to

implement pro-war, pro-austerity policies during the last crisis of Canadian capitalism, when the 2008 Liberal-NDP coalition deal was scuppered by Stephen Harper’s constitutional coup, the NDP is not letting its second chance go to waste. By keeping Trudeau in power, Canada’s social democrats are ensuring that the Liberal government can press ahead with the right-wing, anti-worker agenda it has pursued since 2015. This has included the hiking of military spending by over 70 percent and the further integration of Canada’s armed forces into US-led military-strategic offensives around the world; the imposition of below-inflation transfers for health spending to the provinces; and the persecution of refugees in alliance with the far-right Trump administration.

The services provided to the Canadian ruling elite by the unions and NDP are all the more pivotal under conditions of a growth in social opposition and anti-capitalist sentiment. The mass protests that have swept Canada in recent weeks not only reflect the justifiable outrage of tens of thousands of workers and young people at the brutal police murder of George Floyd and police violence and racism. They also express mounting dissatisfaction with an entire social order that has nothing to offer but ruthless exploitation, mass poverty, and the threat of getting infected and dying to swell the profits of the super-rich.

The ruling class fears nothing more than the prospect of these initial expressions of opposition coalescing into a politically conscious movement of the working class challenging the capitalist profit system. It is precisely to prevent such an outcome that the unions and NDP are intensifying their cooperation with the Liberals and big business.

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