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Canada/Quebec

More of the same

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The June 2nd general election results were good news from a capitalist class war perspective. The northern horizon shows no major threat to rapid economic restructuring or government austerity budgets. But the escalation of tensions around the Quebec national question points to storm clouds ahead.

Canadian imperialism increasingly sees its future in prying open the global economy for foreign investment and exports (by extending the North American Free Trade Area NAFTA to the rest of Latin America and above all by developing Asia-Pacific integration via APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation)).

Domestically a drive to become "internationally competitive", and "fight the deficit" through neo-liberal cutbacks federally and provincially are driving down popular living standards.

In office since 1993, Jean Cretien's Liberal Party have succeeded in imposing the most draconian cutbacks in social spending in the post-war era. Responsibility is being passed to the provinces through multi-billion dollar cuts in transfer payments for health, post-secondary education and welfare. Despite promises of job creation, official unemployment under the Liberals is still nearly 10% (and much higher for youth). The lot of the poor is increasingly desperate because of major cutbacks in eligibility for unemployment insurance and welfare.

None of this has led to a mass radicalisation or political shift to the left by the majority of the working class. The Liberal's parliamentary majority and share of the popular vote (38%) was less than expected. The result suggests an undercurrent of mass insecurity and disaffection — although anti-elitist anger is currently being expressed in very fragmentary ways. Public lack of confidence in politicians and politics was reflected in falling voter turnout. At 67%, this was Canada's lowest turnout in more than 50 years.

The Liberals sought re-election on the basis of their economic record, including their success in reducing the "deficit," coupled with promises for the gullible of better times ahead. They suggested jobs would increase in a favourable business climate and that once the war on the deficit had been won there would be fewer cuts and more money could be freed to address issues like child poverty.

The most overtly right-wing parties, the Conservatives and the Reform Party, raised issues like tax cuts for the wealthy and law and order. But they failed to make an electoral breakthrough. The Liberals largely stole their economic agenda, and particularly in Ontario, the most populous province, the right-wing vote was evenly split between Reform and Conservatives.

Among the issues largely ignored in this election were the negative impact of global capitalist economic restructuring, massive government cutbacks in social spending, mass joblessness and underemployment, deepening poverty, no future for youth, attacks on affirmative action on women's and gay lesbian and rights, racism against visible minority immigrants and first nations, first nations' right to sovereignty and accelerating environmental destruction.

Social Democracy

The vote of the social democratic New Democratic Party rose modestly from 7 to 11%. But it scored a breakthrough

in the Atlantic provinces. Canada's poorest region has been devastated by mass unemployment and government cutbacks. The NDP succeeded in its very limited goal of electing more NDP members to Parliament and regaining its official parliamentary party status. But it failed to win back most of the working class votes lost in 1993, when its support plummeted from 21 to 7% of votes.

The NDP criticised Liberal promises as utterly worthless given their past record, and demanded "real targets on jobs" and greater commitments on social programs. But while the NDP campaign reached some people, it failed to have an impact in most regions.

The irrelevance and failure of social democracy was particularly evident in the industrial heartland of Ontario, where the NDP won no seats and only 11% of the vote. In Ontario last year, some 200,000 people took part in a Toronto protest against the "slash-and-burn" policies of the Harris provincial government. However, this failed to translate into electoral support for the federal NDP.

This partly reflects the capitalist stranglehold over the media and political discourse. But it also points to a host of political problems. This includes a recent impasse and downturn in mass struggle against the Harris government due to a split within the labour bureaucracy and a retreat from organising days of action, as well as a lack of broader political radicalism of the movement, which has focused on the policies of a particularly reactionary provincial government without making the links to federal cutbacks let alone the capitalist roots of the attacks.

Voters also remembered the NDP provincial government in Ontario which bowed to the neo-liberal agenda and imposed an anti-worker social contract. Since being defeated, the NDP has shown itself unwilling and unable to play a positive role in building mass extra-parliamentary struggles. Nevertheless, the NDP continues to survive as limited parliamentary force and it is not about to disappear.

Many on the left feel extremely dissatisfied with the NDP. But the question remains, How to create a mass political alternative?

Talk of creating a new labour party has died down. The NDP maintains its social democratic character as a reformist workers party with a pro-capitalist program. In the campaign, party leader Alexa McDonough did speak out for jobs and against cutbacks, especially in health care and education. but she also identified with the record of NDP provincial governments, which have imposed cutbacks and attacked the poor while in office.

There is little reason to expect a major change. The NDP did well enough, especially in McDonough's Atlantic region, that a leadership challenge seems unlikely. Most of the labour bureaucracy remains loyal to the NDP, even though, in many cases they are unable to convince their members.

But there is little real renewal of the NDP, whose membership is growing increasingly old. It is certainly failing to win over a new generation of youth, which is increasingly cynical and despairing of the existing political process.

No consensus on the far left

Mirroring the general extreme fragmentation of politics in the Canadian state, there is no consensus among individuals and the very small socialist groups to the left of the NDP about how to respond.

Some radicals campaigned for specific NDP candidates, "to have more critical voices in Parliament." Some said one should vote NDP, but that working inside the NDP and the election campaign itself were largely irrelevant to social change which must come from independent mobilisation and grass roots organising from below. Others weren't prepared to vote NDP, pointing to the strongly pro-capitalist record of the NDP in provincial governments.

The creation of significant alternative socialist campaigns was hamstrung by a shortening of the campaign period, increased financial barriers, election rules that requires groups to run at least 50 candidates to be a legally registered party and above all Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system.

There is growing support for proportional representation, partly because of the extreme regional distortions in the federal result. The Green Party, which seems to be consolidating a small electoral base in British Columbia where environmental conflicts are hottest, could have won representation under some PR systems. But for now the large majority on the left will probably focus their attention on extra parliamentary issues, building a diverse series of movements and seeking to strengthen resistance to the multiple fronts of the capitalist offensive.

Facing up to the national question

However, the left in English-speaking Canada could face a severe challenge if developments in Quebec lead to the break-up of the federal state. Given the weakness of independent working class politics and the left, such a split would almost certainly take place in an unfavourable climate.

The NDP's Canadian nationalism leads it to hostility and a total lack of sympathy to Quebec nationalism. In return, the NDP was totally repudiated in Quebec, winning only 2% of the vote. The NDP is formally in favour of Quebec self-determination, but not unconditionally. When asked if she would respect a Quebec vote to separate, NDP leader McDonough gave the totally equivocal response that "it all depends."

The NDP's lack of will to commit to a principled unconditional defence of self-determination extends into much if not all the labour movement and the broad left, which is very reluctant to take up the issue. This reflects a widespread lack of consciousness in English Canada on the history and political significance of national oppression of the Quebecois within the Canadian state. Moreover, most of the left and the labour movement have failed to distinguish politically between the current highly unattractive pro-capitalist nationalist leadership of the Quebec struggle and legitimate national demands.