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The Nader Campaign in the U.S. Elections

By Roger Annis and John Riddell

A sharp discussion has broken out in the U.S. left over the presidential candidacy of Ralph Nader, who will be proposed for nomination by the Green Party at its June 23-28 convention. A longtime campaigner against abuses of corporate power, Nader won 2.9 million votes (3%) as Green Party presidential candidate in the 2000 elections, in what was the most effective challenge from a U.S. left-wing party in 80 years.

Among those in the U.S. who consider themselves socialists, some favor supporting Democrat John Kerry, some are for a token Green Party campaign that avoids contesting "close states," some are for an energetic campaign for Nader, and some propose to run candidates on a socialist platform.

The antidemocratic characteristics of the U.S. capitalists' two-party system weigh heavily in this discussion. Nonetheless, it is helpful to see the Nader campaign in an international context, and in the framework of socialist principle.

In many countries, fierce governmental attacks on working people and social services have led many voters to fall away from the main governmental parties and seek alternatives—sometimes on the right, and more often with new political formations that identify either with socialism or (like the Greens) with ecological concerns.

In the current Canadian federal election campaign, for example, opinion polls show that support for each of the two dominant capitalist parties has dropped substantially. Support has risen for three strikingly dissimilar "alternatives": the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP); the Green Party, which in Canada has a rightist program; and the Bloc Quebecois, a bourgeois party that advocates Quebec sovereignty.

New Electoral Alternatives

In several European countries, new groupings identified with socialism have gained influence. For example, the Scottish Socialist Party won 8% in recent elections; Trotskyist groups have won more than 5% of the national vote in France; and in Britain a left-wing electoral coalition called Respect won 5% in this month's municipal vote in London.

In most contexts, socialists would leave the purely bourgeois Green parties out of account and focus attention on parties identified with the working class and socialism. But in the U.S., where there is no tradition of broadly based working-class parties, Nader's supporters include many who view themselves as Marxists.

Yet most explanations of the need to support Nader make no reference to the class struggle that Marxists view as the driving force of politics. Instead, we hear that "the platform is progressive," or "it represents the Movement," or "it wins support from those fighting corporate power," or "it represents a break with the two-party system."

Deceptive Platforms

Nader's program incorporates many progressive demands that have been raised by anti-capitalist movements. Yet official platforms are a poor predictor of what parties claiming to represent socialism and working people will do if elected—as we know in Canada from the record of NDP governments. The goal of social-democratic parties like the NDP is to share in administering the capitalist state. When elected, they abandon their platform and act as loyal caregivers of this state, doing the necessary to keep it in healthy condition as an agency to repress and exploit working people.

Parties of anticapitalist protest may initially aim to follow a different course, but if they gain strength, they tend to be assimilated by the state that they set out to reform and to become buttresses of capitalist rule. Three factors come into play:

- The party acquires an apparatus of well-paid staff and elected officials with a stake in the existing political system, and this bureaucracy gradually takes control.
- The party dilutes its program by giving political support to bourgeois regimes in return for minor reforms—in minority-government situations, for example, or through governmental coalitions.
- The party takes office, but finds itself the prisoner of the surrounding capitalist state (ministries, courts, the police and army, mechanisms of financial control, all backed up by the capitalist media), and is forced to abandon almost all of its program as the price of "power."

This process, familiar to us in Canada through the history of the CCF/NDP, was more recently illustrated by the Green Party of Germany: launched with far-reaching goals, it is now a compliant coalition partner of the German Social Democrats.

Workers Government

This degeneration is inevitable among parties that do not chart a course to lead the working class to power. The alternative is that long advocated by Marxists, namely, the struggle for a workers government. The Fourth Congress (1922) of the Communist International described such a government in these terms:

“The most elementary tasks of a workers’ government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organizations, bringing control over

production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes, and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

“Such a workers’ government is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers’ organizations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grassroots level.” (Theses on Tactics, section 11)

Contesting elections is part of this strategy, but it is the struggle for workers’ power in the streets and the workplaces that is decisive.

This perspective provides the essential criterion on which to judge electoral initiatives: Do they in some way advance the struggle for a workers government? In Canada, this cannot be said of the Bloc Quebecois or the Greens. On the other hand, the NDP, despite its pro-capitalist program, embodies the notion that trade unions should fight for political power, and this provides a principled basis to give it critical support in the June 28 Canadian elections.

Assessing the Nader Campaign

In the United States, the Democratic Party is presently furious against Nader for his decision to run, blaming him for George Bush’s narrow victory in 2000 and warning of a similar outcome this year. Their efforts to block his candidacy have had an impact in the Green Party, where many favor abstention or not running in “close states” like Florida. It is far from clear whether Nader can win the Greens nomination.

These efforts to block an independent campaign and boost the Democratic Party candidacy of John Kerry are reactionary. The threat that working people face today is not the reelection of George Bush, but continued dominance of corporate power as a whole. That power is represented by both the dominant U.S. parties. Moreover, the whole gamut of electoral mechanisms to exclude minority parties and herd voters into the Republican-Democratic camp is anti-democratic to the core.

Whether Nader’s candidacy is worthy of support is another question. He has won some backing as an “antiwar candidate.” But his published program tells another story. Nader warns that U.S. policy in Iraq has “diminished U.S. security ... from the Islamic world” and has involved spending \$155 billion “when critical needs are not being met at home.” He calls for replacing U.S. forces in Iraq “with a UN peacekeeping force, prompt supervised elections, and humanitarian assistance.”

This is not an antiwar position. His proposal would continue the occupation of Iraq and the violation of its Iraqi sovereignty under the flag of the United Nations, which has acted as a pliant tool of the U.S.-led assault on Iraq for the last 14 years.

The balance of Nader’s program contains many progressive notions, like “education for everyone” and “end poverty in the United States,” but fails to target the mechanism of corporate power that generates and imposes poverty, oppression, and ignorance. The entire program is posed in the reactionary framework of the national interests of United States. In no sense does it identify with the interests of working people.

Such a campaign diverts forces away from antiwar and other anticapitalist struggles into a project to patch up the system of capitalist rule.

Working-Class Political Action

Nor is it sufficient to argue that a third-party effort like that of Nader is justified because it will help break the reactionary grip of the twin parties of corporate power.

Major third-party campaigns in U.S. politics in recent decades, such as the right-wing candidacy of H. Ross Perot, have represented attempts to adjust the two-party mechanism and have been readily reabsorbed by the dominant parties. Nader's campaign fits that pattern—and in fact it is utilizing the ballot status of Perot's Reform Party. Many statements by Nader suggest an orientation to reform the Democratic Party. (See <http://www.geocities.com/mnsocialist/nader.html>) And even if the capitalists' antidemocratic two-party structure should break down, they are well able to rule through a multiparty parliamentary structure similar to those of continental Europe, Japan, and Australia.

What is needed to challenge their power is a party with a different class foundation, one rooted in the struggles of working people. Building such a party is today the common task of all who seek an alternative to the misery and exploitation of the present capitalist order.

Socialist Voice #9, June 9, 2004

The Stakes for Workers in Canada's General Election

By Roger Annis and John Riddell

Canada's June 28 federal election wasn't supposed to unfold this way.

According to the Liberal Party script, Paul Martin's accession to leadership of the party last year would guarantee the election of a fourth Liberal majority government in a row. Martin would bring a fresh face and "new ideas" to Ottawa. His business roots in Quebec and command of the French language would help marginalize the bourgeois nationalist Bloc Quebecois party. Voters would accept the Liberals as a lesser evil to the more overtly right-wing Conservative Party. The union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) would be sidelined through a deft election campaign that would posit the Liberals as defenders of the country's social programs.

Canada's business elite sighed with contentment at this scenario.

But the wheels have fallen off the Liberal wagon. Poll results in early June have the Liberals running neck and neck with the Conservatives. Support for the NDP and the pro-sovereignty Bloc Quebecois is up. The wealthy class is now preparing for all possible results. A Conservative majority? A Conservative governmental alliance with the Bloc Quebecois? A Liberal/NDP alliance? The uncertainty is rattling them. A Globe and Mail editorial on June 3 commented, "Paul Martin is among the best qualified prime ministerial candidate in Canadian history. Why is he struggling so?"

What happened to the Liberals best-laid plans? How can working people use the June 28 election and the Liberal disarray to fight back against eleven years of attacks spearheaded by Liberal governments in Ottawa?

Growing social polarization

The Liberals' misfortunes are the result of a growing social polarization in Canada. Working people have suffered many blows over the past 11 years of Liberal Party rule. The levers of state have been applied to transfer massive wealth from working people into the pockets and bank accounts of the wealthiest Canadians. Taxes have gone up for workers and down for the rich. Social programs have been sharply cut. Democratic rights have been seriously eroded, through laws like the anti-Quebecois "Clarity Bill" and so-called anti-terrorism laws.

Paul Martin was the finance minister during these years and a principal architect of Liberal policies. Today he is reaping the backlash. In the few months preceding the federal election call, large strike and political protest movements headed by the trade unions rocked the provinces of Newfoundland, Quebec and British Columbia. There is deep anger in Ontario as the newly elected Liberal government reneged on its promise not to introduce health care premiums.

Martin's intended direction in foreign policy has also taken a battering. Last year, he announced intention to seek a closer political and military alliance between Ottawa and Washington. But the

news from Iraq has been all bad since then; so bad that Conservative leader Stephen Harper is denying that his party would send Canadian troops to Iraq. Opposition is growing to a new missile defense treaty between the U.S. and Canada.

Despite the Liberal record, there is division among Canada's rulers because many believe the Liberals have not pushed far and fast enough to advance capitalist interests. As a result, they are backing the Conservatives.

In these circumstances, the New Democratic Party has an opportunity for important electoral growth. The party is based on the unions and is viewed by masses of working people as the only major party which defends their rights. It has published a detailed election platform containing many proposals for reform, including:

- Public works programs to create socially useful employment.
- Extension of unemployment insurance benefits.
- Extension of the public health care system, including provision of abortion services to women.
- A 10 percent reduction in post-secondary education tuition fees.
- Scrapping the federal Anti-Terrorism Act.

Prior to the election campaign, NDP leader Jack Layton spoke out against the war and occupation in Iraq. He has pledged that an NDP government would repeal the "Clarity Bill," the federal law that authorizes the Canadian army to occupy Quebec should the people of that province ever vote for independence from Canada. This Bill was adopted with the support of most NDP members of parliament.

Indeed, the modest upturn in support for the NDP that has marked the opening weeks of the election has begun to draw the wrath of Canada's rulers. Their campaign against the NDP will deepen as the party continues to draw support. They oppose the NDP's political platform. But even more, they oppose what this union-based political party symbolizes for many of its supporters, namely, political action by working people that is independent of the capitalists' political parties and governmental apparatus. That's why every person concerned for social justice in Canada has an interest in electing an NDP government, however slim the prospects of that may seem today.

Fight for working class policies

The present leaders of the NDP and the trade unions do not propose nor fight for radical change in the present social order. They dislike the injustices that they see around them, but have no remedy. Jack Layton told interviewers with Canadian Dimension magazine last year, "My belief is that the way you transform the big phenomenon is by a huge number of local actions... The older notion of fundamental, once and for all transformation of society is less likely to succeed. Besides, it's unpalatable to Canadians and to me as well."

“It is local institutions like non-profits and cooperatives and local democracy where the action is.” When asked what would replace the capitalist system if his proposed “local actions” brought the social order to the point of dysfunction, Layton responded, “It is something to think about.”

Layton’s stated goal in favor of peace in today’s war-torn world does not explain nor challenge the social order of capitalism that breeds war. The peace plank in the NDP’s election platform focuses its attention on the protection and enhancement of the Canadian state. Titled, “Protecting Canadian security through peace,” the platform proposes a pivotal role for United Nations-sponsored military intervention in foreign lands, with Canada as an enthusiastic partner. The platform says nothing about the imperialist occupation forces presently in Haiti and Afghanistan in which Canada is a key player. Nor does it call for an end to the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Domestically, the NDP platform fails the key test of support to the national rights of the Quebecois. It opposes the right of the oppressed Quebecois nation to self-determination. Instead, it proposes something called “flexible federalism,” whereby provincial governments could opt out of federal programs provided they meet standards set by the federal government.

For their part, union officials in Quebec have long ago turned their back on organizing for working class unity across the Canada/Quebec divide, choosing instead to support, and thereby subordinate workers’ interests to, the bourgeois nationalist Bloc Quebecois and Parti Quebecois parties.

The historic failure of the trade unions and the NDP in English-speaking Canada to recognize and defend Quebec’s right to self-determination, including the right to independence, is the biggest obstacle in the way of the working class in Canada forging a political alliance across language and national barriers and mounting a challenge for government.

Lacking any perspective of replacing capitalism, the NDP has in practice seen no alternative to defending the prevailing order, and NDP provincial governments have without exception proven to be reliable defenders of capitalist order.

Nevertheless, the election of an NDP government in Ottawa would unsettle Canada’s political and economic order. Working people’s expectations of change would clash sharply with the NDP leadership’s commitment to defend capitalism. This would open the door to developing a new, socialist leadership and program for the working class.

This election is an opportunity both to build support for the NDP and also to explain why its pro-capitalist course runs counter to the interests of its working-class base and why socialism offers the only alternative.

Socialist Voice #10, June 14, 2004

Announcing the Socialist History Project

June 14, 2004 — For Immediate Release

Website documents Canadian socialist history Documents, Essays and Reminiscences Now Available Online

Over the past 100 years, Canadian socialists have written a vast amount of material on the political issues they considered important, but virtually none of those writings are available today. The experiences, ideas, analyses and insights of a century of revolutionary socialism in Canada are in danger of being forgotten and lost forever.

The Socialist History Project, announced this month by South Branch Publishing, aims to recover that material and make it available on the web. The project, headed by Ian Angus, the author of the pathbreaking history of the early Communist Party, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, is not affiliated to any political organization.

Its website, devoted to “documenting the revolutionary socialist tradition in Canada” can be found at www.socialisthistory.ca. A limited selection of material is now on-line, but the project director says much more will be added in coming months.

“We aim to publish three types of material,” Angus says. “First, statements, reports and articles on key political issues and trends, written by revolutionary socialists over the past century. Second, essays by historians about the revolutionary left. And third, reminiscences and memoirs by participants in the socialist movement. “We think this material is important not just to historians and archivists, but to the new generation of radicalizing youth.”

The Socialist History Project is actively soliciting essays and reminiscences, as well as donations or loans of socialist periodicals, pamphlets, and documents, especially material from before 1980. For details, visit www.socialisthistory.ca