

The Canadian Experience: Labor, the NDP and The Social Movements

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FOUNDED IN 1961, THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY UNITED A SMALL, predominantly Western, farm-labor-socialist party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), with the recently united labor central, the Canadian Labor Congress (CLC), to form a new party. The CCF had emerged in Western Canada in 1933 in response to the social and economic crisis of the Great Depression. The CCF registered its first major electoral success by winning the provincial election in Saskatchewan in 1944 during the wartime labor radicalization. As the government of this small province, the CCF initiated many innovative public policies, introducing the prototype of Canada's universal provincial health insurance system, establishing collective bargaining rights (including the right to strike) for public employees, mandating joint occupational health and safety committees in most worksites in the province, as well as initiatives in public ownership and regulation of some of the province's largest industries.

While many of the programs and policies first developed by the Saskatchewan CCF government were copied by other provinces, and even the federal government, the CCF was not able to win power in any other province, nor was it able to capture a significant number of seats in the federal Parliament. Outside of Western Canada, the CCF remained a minor party, polling a mere 10 percent of the popular vote in federal elections. While the CCF had some organized labor support, the issue of labor political action was a contentious matter within the Canadian labor movement.

Since the 1930s, the Canadian labor movement had been split into two federations, with craft unions in the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC) and industrial and nationalist unions in the Canadian Congress of Labor (CCL). An analogous situation, of course, existed in the United States but a significant difference was the Canadian movements' commitment to independent labor political action by the industrial and nationalists union federation, the Canadian Congress of Labor. The Trades and La-

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bor Congress held the U.S. labor position of "non-partisanship," (that is no affiliation or special relationship with any political party). The Canadian Congress of Labor, on the other hand, endorsed the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation as "the political arm of labor in Canada" because it saw the need for a labor-based political party and thought that the CCF was the appropriate vehicle. In the discussions leading up to the fusion of the two labor federations in 1956, political action and support for the CCF remained a contentious issue dividing the two labor bodies. Indeed, the final agreement forged in 1956 postponed the thorny issue of political affiliation. Two years later, at the next labor convention, a resolution was passed which called for "a broadly-based people's political movement, which embraces the CCF, the labor movement, farm organizations, professional people and other liberally-minded persons." This resolution further instructed the CLC Executive Council to enter into discussions with other groups "to formulate a constitution and a program for such a political instrument."

Labor Helps to Launch a New Party

IN THE WAKE OF THE 1958 TORY ELECTION SWEEP, the CLC and CCF formed a joint political committee, the National Committee for a New Party, to encourage widespread participation in the construction of a new party. "New Party Clubs" sprang up around the country to encourage activists to meet and discuss the idea of a new, labor-based, political party. While both labor and the CCF leadership wanted the new party to be labor-based, there was concern from the grassroots "New Party Clubs," CCF constituencies and even activists within the labor movement itself that the well-organized and disciplined union movement would totally dominate the New Party. Organized labor, they feared, would move the New Party away from its "movement" roots and into narrow electoral and reformist politics. Moreover, they feared that labor would be a conservative force within the party, diluting the CCF's prairie socialism, populism, and radicalism.

In response to these concerns, a structure was developed to assure a balanced representation between constituency members (members of the party resident in a single electoral district) and affiliate organizations (union locals which formally affiliate their membership to the party). The party adopted a constitution which avoided bloc voting and bloc representation on leadership bodies (such as executives or councils). At the convention, each delegate or representative would have one vote. However, a formula was devised for delegate allocation to conventions which gave more weight to local constituency associations. Since individual trade unionists could be active in the party through their community-based constituency association and through their union affiliation, the "weighted" representation for affiliate organizations was viewed as a way

of dealing with the problem of union activists being overrepresented.

The founders of the new party hoped that the NDP would quickly grow beyond its predecessor's prairie roots and minor-party status. And, indeed, some impressive gains were made throughout the 1970s and early 1980s in provincial elections in Western Canada, including the formation of governments in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia, and the Yukon. With approximately 90% of Canada's workers covered by provincial labor laws and regulations, election of provincial NDP governments in the West in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in significant workplace and labor law reform. While organized labor occasionally became embroiled in conflicts with NDP provincial governments, especially when the labor-supported governments failed to move quickly on trade union matters, labor has generally been a stalwart party supporter in the West.

The Waffle Movement: The Struggle for an Activist Party

A SUBJECT OF CONSIDERABLE INTERNAL DEBATE AND INTERACTION between the labor movement and the NDP was the issue of economic development and Canadian independence. In 1961, at the time of the founding of the NDP, a majority of affiliates to the CLC were international unions. These unions tended to associate their members' jobs with the success of economic continentalism, which linked Canada's economic prosperity to its ties to the U.S. economy. In the late 1960s, this continentalist approach was challenged by the Canadian nationalist movement, leading to one of the most intensive periods of political debate in the NDP's history. It also generated the nationalist Waffle group inside the party. A product of the youth radicalization of the 1960s, with roots in both the New Left and the nationalism of the Old Left in Canada, the Waffle began as a collection of left academics seeking to push the party to adopt a more radical program of social transformation. With its founding document, the Waffle Manifesto "For an Independent and Socialist Canada," the group sought to involve the party and the labor movement in a discussion about the need for Canadian economic sovereignty.

For the Waffle, any discussions of socialism in Canada had to be linked to an understanding of Canada's political economy and in particular the dependency of the Canadian economy on the United States. The Waffle recognized that independence from U.S. corporate domination must go hand in hand with any move toward democratic socialism in Canada. The group's name came from the fact that it "waffled" on the role of the trade union movement in this struggle — and in particular on the issue of whether to call for Canadian workers to break with international unions and build autonomous Canadian unions. In an attempt to avoid alienating the powerful international unions within the party, the Waffle Manifesto simply called for greater democracy in the labor movement and for workers' control in the workplace. But the NDP leadership quickly recognized that the Waffle's nationalism was a major challenge to the current direction and leadership of both the party and the labor movement.

Beyond the questions of organized labor and the economy, the Waffle forced discussion in the party on a number of issues previously ignored by the NDP including gender equality, the rights of indigenous peoples and Quebecois. In

particular, the Waffle demanded that the NDP recognize Quebec's right, as an oppressed nation within Canada, to self-determination. It argued that the NDP had never won a single seat in Quebec and has never been able to build a base in the province because Quebec's labor movement and political activists alike viewed the NDP as an "English Canadian" federalist party, opposed to Quebec's national aspirations. Much of the Quebec labor movement did not endorse or affiliate with the NDP. This is still true today.

Aside from the policy differences, the Waffle promoted a very different image of the party, one that sought to break from the narrow parliamentary mold. It mobilized party activists to join anti-war demonstrations, in support of militant labor disputes, pro-choice rallies, and even published press releases and political statements in its own name. These latter actions, carried out in the name of the NDP/Waffle, constituted the "technicality" used by the party leadership to condemn the Waffle as disloyal and "a party within a party" and demand that it disband — essentially expelling it from the party. A whole generation of militant activists and left intellectuals quit the NDP with the Waffle expulsion in 1972. The rancor the incident generated continued and among other things, poisoned relations between the NDP and intellectuals and radicals for years afterwards.

Beyond the Waffle: Ongoing Tensions in the NDP

The Waffle experience underlines the problem that the NDP has in defining its relationship to popular movements. At its best, the NDP is a broad political coalition that provides a permanent structure for labor and other progressive groups, such as the women's movement, environmentalists, anti-poverty groups, students, gays and lesbians and the peace movement, to work together and to formulate a comprehensive political program beyond individual, single issue demands. A strength of these popular movements is that they are autonomous — that is, while party members are often supporters and activists in these movements, the movements nevertheless have their own base and organization outside of the party. They can invigorate party activists, and they help them remember that, as important as winning elections is, change comes through organizing a mass constituency for change — both before and after elections.

But not everyone inside the party views the popular movements and their influence on the party as a strength. The NDP leadership — and Caucus in particular — also fears the social movements. It fears that they will push the party too far, too fast — giving it the image of being "captured by special interests" and too radical or too far left. A related charge, which arose in the last few federal elections, is that these movements draw activists into single issue and protest campaigns that do not translate into voter support for the NDP at election time and drains activist energy and resources.

The Action Canada Network (ACN), a non-partisan organization of labor, women, community and church groups, opposed to the free trade agreement, is a case in point. The ACN has been extremely successful in educating people on the threat of the New Right and in building an opposition to the Tory business agenda of free trade, privatization and deregulation. Over the last five years, a majority of Canadians has consistently been opposed to Free Trade (both in the form of the Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement of 1989 and the NAFTA). But opposition to the Tories and free trade has not translated into support for the NDP — and it

has fed rumblings inside the party that the ACN and social movement mobilization have become substitutes for partisan political action with the aim of winning government.

Beyond the tensions between social movements and the party, another source of ongoing tension is the issue of accountability of the elected members of Parliament and provincial legislatures to the party rank and file. That is, when the party wins, how do labor and other activists assure that "their" government implements the party's program and remains accountable to the party's membership? Of course, all political systems have problems of accountability of elected officials, but the character of the "accountability problem" within the NDP has come to the fore with three NDP provincial governments in power at this point.

Disagreements between those holding elected office and the grassroots tend to be a permanent feature of most social-democratic parties throughout the world, with the breach widening during periods of government and easing during periods of opposition. Organizationally, some of these tensions can be eased by building structures to promote meaningful consultation, collaboration and ongoing accountability of elected members. But at the root of the problem are profound political differences about the party's mission and how social change is to be achieved. At one extreme, generally favored by those holding elected office, the party is viewed as an electoral machine that is organized to contest and win elections and gain power to implement positive social change. At the other extreme, many activists see the party as part of a wider social movement that uses elections, as well as extra-parliamentary activity, to educate, organize, and mobilize people to bring about change for themselves.

For much of the history of the party, members interested in promoting a more activist approach or in making significant changes in the party's program and platform have formed into groupings and caucuses such as the Left Caucus in Ontario, the Socialist Caucus in British Columbia, or, more recently, the Green Caucus, which seeks to promote environmentalist ideas within the party. While these groups have promoted important political discussions both within and outside of the party, the party leadership has tended to view them as disruptive and divisive, rather than as signs of a healthy and democratic political organization.

Today's Crisis in the NDP

WHILE THE DRAMATIC FALL IN THE PARTY'S SUPPORT IN THE 1993 federal election brought the crisis inside of the NDP to public attention, trouble has been brewing for many years. After the 1988 federal election campaign, for example, two senior labor leaders publicly criticized the party leadership for its failure to make opposition to the Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement a major focus of the election campaign. These public criticisms and many private accountability sessions led the CLC and the party to set up a special task force to evaluate the relationship between the two organizations. But with a change of leader in the federal party and with a number of provincial elections on the horizon, these badly-needed discussions were cut short and resulted in simply a reaffirmation of support for the party by labor and a pledge to increase labor participation in leadership bodies in the party.

Within a few years of the 1988 federal election campaign, the NDP won three provincial elections: Saskatchewan, Ontario and British Columbia. Brian

Mulroney's Tory federal government sank in the polls and remained at record low levels of public approval. Mulroney led a new round of constitutional reform aimed at winning Quebec's inclusion into the Canadian constitutional, but this proved a dismal failure, with a majority of Canadians in every region in the country rejecting the package. With little consultation of party leadership bodies, the NDP provincial governments and the federal NDP opted to support Mulroney's constitutional reform package, while the newly-formed rightist populist Reform Party rejected it. In the Western provinces, the NDP's traditional stronghold, Reform positioned itself as the anti-establishment party, painting the NDP as an old-line, status quo party in favor of big government and welfare and a captive of radical special interest groups.

But more significant than the populist challenge from the right at a federal level, were the problems that developed between the NDP provincial governments and their base — including labor and the popular movements. While there are problems in both British Columbia and Saskatchewan, deep dissatisfaction with the Ontario government of Premier Bob Rae threatens to split the labor movement in the province and possibly nationally.

After forming the first ever NDP government in Ontario with a surprise electoral victory in the summer of 1990, the inexperienced government stumbled from scandal to scandal in its first few years in power. The business community, alarmed by the NDP's victory in Canada's industrial heartland, mobilized in opposition to most of the government's initiatives. In particular, vicious campaigns were waged against the provincial budget and labor law reform. Under the pressure of the assault by the business community and the province's growing financial problems, the government backed down and abandoned many of its promises, including the introduction of a universal, no-fault public auto insurance system. While the government assisted many unionized, large private-sector employers, including Algoma Steel, Spruce Falls, DeHavilland and Chrysler, the business community never eased its attack on the NDP government.

In the spring of 1993, as the recession hit Ontario hard with high unemployment and a large provincial deficit, the Rae government introduced an austerity program of reduced government service and cuts in the public sector. Termed "the most anti-worker intrusion into free collective bargaining in Canadian history" by the Ontario Federation of Labor, the Social Contract Act cancelled all public sector contracts and forced \$2 billion in concessions onto union members. The 900,000 public sector workers in the province were handed a three-year wage freeze, and an additional twelve days of "unpaid leave" each year.

While organized labor in Ontario condemned the anti-worker legislation, many private sector unions felt that public sector cuts and savings were financially necessary because of the large provincial government debt — and that, on balance, the NDP provincial government has been a tremendous aid to unions in the province. Needless to say, public sector workers, and their allies in the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) felt that the Rae government's extreme violation of collective bargaining rights through draconian "social contract" legislation could no longer receive labor support. At the November 1993 convention of the Ontario Federation of Labor (OFL), a resolution passed condemning the Rae government and calling on the OFL not to support the NDP in the next provincial election unless the "social contract" legislation was repealed. This resolution passed, however, over the objection of private sector union delegates who took the ex-

traordinary action of walking out of the convention.

This is not the first time that organized labor has been angered by an NDP provincial government's actions, nor is it the first time that labor has questioned its affiliation with the party. But this clash is more acute because of the extreme anger with the Rae government, the dismal showing of the NDP in the last federal election, and the growing skepticism and pessimism inside of labor and in the popular movement about the possibility of government (any government) being able to stem the tide of corporate power.

In place of affiliation to the NDP, some in the labor movement are suggesting that Canadian labor might return to U.S. labor's strategy of non-affiliation (the official position of the U.S. labor movement is that there is no formal relationship with the Democratic party) and a policy of "rewarding your friends, and punishing your enemies" (the current strategy of a group of building trades unions outside of the CLC and affiliated to the Canadian Federation of Labor). Alternatively, the AFL adopted a convention resolution calling for coalition work and participation in "broad-based coalitions to ensure all governments are responsive to our agenda." Finally, there has even been the suggestion that labor try to form a new labor party in Canada.

To take these arguments in reverse order, it's rather difficult to imagine that Canadian labor will launch a "new labor party" when it appears not to have yet fully come to grips with what the problems are with the one it has. If labor and the NDP decided that a major realignment and restructuring is needed, it should be preceded by an even more thorough debate and discussion of the variety that were launched in 1958 with the new party discussions. But an important difference between then and now, is that when the new party discussions began labor was in the process of reuniting — after a 20-year split between the trades and industrial unions — whereas today Canadian labor seems increasingly divided and under attack.

While participation in broad-based coalitions is important, this can not be a substitution for a political party. Labor should not view itself politically as simply a lobby group, or as a "special interest," seeking concessions or a hearing from government. Rather, labor needs a strategy for government — one that would meet the needs of all working people. The Gompert approach to political action (syndicalist in its essence) condemns labor to always being on the outside — and Canadian labor has had too much experience with what positive labor-based government can do at the provincial level, to abandon the political arena for long. But what is so important about political parties, and why is it valuable for labor to have a party of its own?

What Do Parties Do?

BEYOND WINNING AND LOSING ELECTIONS, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS that political parties do is help to set the political agenda. They define what problems are to be considered a legitimate political issue, how politics are conducted and what relations and conflicts may be resolved through the political process. Participation in the NDP has in the past assisted the labor movement in shaping its concerns and making them part of the national agenda. From health care, to workers' rights in the workplace, to a role for public as well as private enterprise, labor political action through the NDP has moved the political spectrum in Canada

to the left.

Labor political action through participation in a party has also helped to transform unions in Canada. Unions have had to broaden their concerns beyond their own ranks and include the interests and needs of the majority of working people in Canada, including the unorganized. Through years of political action and involvement, there is a labor movement in Canada beyond the more narrow ranks of trade union membership. While Canadian unions are far from perfect, and are often leery of, and occasionally even hostile to, the new social movements, movement activists and trade unionists learned to work together through the NDP, building the trust and experience necessary to work in coalition — sometimes, even beyond the NDP parliamentary and electoral concerns. Politics is, after all, about discussion and sharing and debating ideas. The party has served as a vehicle for progressive organizations to work together politically, to influence each other, to enhance dialogue, and at the same time to provide the pressure and cohesion necessary to keep these disparate groups together. While this creates a constant tension within the NDP, rooted in the very different organizational practices and beliefs of groups and individuals affiliated with it, this tension is for the most part healthy — though rare is the leadership, either in the labor movement or the party, that can appreciate this fact.

Finally, participation in a labor-based political party has forced labor to face the issue of government — not exclusively as a lobbyist, or interest group — but as an organization that seeks to win political power for working people and make our whole society more just and equitable.

Conclusion

FOR ORGANIZED LABOR, WINNING ELECTIONS AND HAVING THE NDP form a government (whether provincially or federally) has not been the main reason for support of the tactic of labor having its own party. After all, for most of its history, in most provinces, when measured by the sole criterion of being able to “win” elections, the party has been a failure. Rather, supporters measure the party in terms of its overall effectiveness in forging a strategy for working people and developing an alternative progressive agenda to the neo-liberal program of free trade, privatization and deregulation. But even viewed from this perspective, the NDP throughout its history is still somewhat contradictory. In short, the NDP has been both an aid and a barrier to the politics of social transformation.

Today the battlelines between labor and capital are more sharply drawn than at any time since the NDP was founded. A decade of privatization, deregulation and free trade, along with corporate tax giveaways and the resulting large deficits, have all reduced the redistributive power of government. The NDP needs bold policies to address this crisis — not simply “kinder cuts.” The NDP must move beyond opposition to the current market-driven restructuring and begin to reassert the social values that should influence economic decision-making. It must champion economic democracy and popular planning. And it will require the party to move beyond parliamentarism and to support, build, and work with the popular movements — both when the party is in government and when it is the opposition. Progressive change today requires mobilization in support of change — and the NDP needs the social movements and their ability to mobilize

longer in the hands of social-democratic governments to deliver on reform. Rather, they must help to strengthen the social movements that create the climate and momentum for change. As long as the party views the social movements as competition or as "special interests" that are trying to push the party too far too fast — it will find itself fighting its friends and falling victim to dissension. Rather, the party needs to see itself as a disciplined coalition of these progressive movements, and actively seek, in government to strengthen their influence.

Increasingly today, labor needs a political strategy. There is nothing that can be won at the bargaining table that cannot be taken away through legislation or regulation. In the long run, for labor to survive and grow, it needs to reach beyond its own ranks, the trade union movement, and work in coalition and partnership with other community and progressive organizations. And to do this in a sustained manner, it must develop its own vision and program for society. That requires political action — something difficult to imagine outside of the context of a political party.