

# Two Canadian by-election results underscore urgency of workers repudiating the union-NDP-Liberal alliance

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The outcome of two by-elections in the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Manitoba last Monday sheds light on the crisis of political perspective facing the working class.

While they indicated growing popular hostility to the right-wing, pro-war, pro-austerity alliance between the big business minority Liberal government, the trade union bureaucracy and the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), the absence of a working class political alternative left the field open for reactionary political forces—the Tories under far-right leader Pierre Poilievre and the anti-immigrant Quebec chauvinist Bloc Québécois—to gain ground.

In the most significant result, Justin Trudeau and his Liberals lost one of their safest Quebec seats to the BQ, the federal sister party of the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois. In the Montreal riding of LaSalle-Émard-Verdun, which the Liberals won by over 10,000 votes at the 2021 general election, Liberal candidate Laura Palestini lost by 248 votes to the BQ's Louis-Philippe Sauvé. The NDP came a close third.

If a swing of a similar magnitude took place across Quebec at the next election, at least a dozen Liberals would lose their seats.

Monday's defeat marked the Liberals' second by-election loss in three months in an urban seat considered among their safest. In June they lost Toronto-St. Paul's to the Conservatives, giving the official opposition representation in Metro Toronto, the country's most populous city, for the first time since 2015.

The NDP held onto the staunchly working class riding of Elmwood-Transcona in Winnipeg in Monday's second by-election, beating out the Conservatives.

Leila Dance, the head of a non-profit dedicated to promoting small business and corporate development in Transcona, held onto the seat that has been represented by a New Democrat without interruption for the past 45 years. Her margin of victory, however, was just 4 percent, as the Conservatives, whose candidate was promoted by Poilievre as a proud member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), saw their share of the vote swell by 20 percent to 44.

The Liberal share of the vote, meanwhile, collapsed, failing by over 10 percentage points to just 4.8 percent. This is one of the party's worst ever by-election results dating back more than a century and a half.

Although the Conservatives failed to win either by-election, the results confirmed what opinion polls have been documenting for a year. Liberal support is hemorrhaging. And the Conservatives based on a demagogic social appeal—attacking the Liberal-NDP “coalition,” carbon taxes, and “Justinflation” for the crisis manifestly wracking the country, and profiting from the rallying of powerful sections of the ruling class behind Poilievre—appear poised to sweep to power in the next election.

## The anti-worker, pro-war record of the union-NDP supported Liberal government

Voters are turning their backs on the Liberals and NDP because both parties have demonstrated either in government or by their support for it that they are ruthless enforcers of the interests of Canadian ruling class, including its imperialist foreign policy. They have presided over a huge inflation-driven cut in real wages, a nationwide housing crisis, collapsing public services, the virtual outlawing of workers' strikes in the transport and logistics sectors and support for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians.

For the past nine years, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has overseen a massive expansion of Canada's military budget and ensured that Ottawa is playing a major role in the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine and Washington's all-sided economic and military-strategic offensive against China.

Trudeau's initial posturing as a friend of refugees and immigrants has long since been abandoned in favour of a callous anti-immigrant agenda based on sealing off Canada's borders and working with whomever is in power in Washington to deport “illegal” immigrants.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trudeau government handed over \$650 billion to corporate Canada and the banks overnight, which was followed by a homicidal campaign to reopen the economy and infect the entire population with a deadly virus in order to protect corporate profits at the expense of human lives.

Since 2019, Trudeau's minority government has only been able to implement its anti-worker program due to the trade unions' suppression of the class struggle and the unstinting political support it has received from the NDP. The New Democrats have secured the Liberals a parliamentary majority on all key votes, including major military spending increases and austerity budgets for public services. Just weeks after the NATO-instigated Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NDP codified this support in a confidence-and-supply agreement aimed, in the words of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, at securing “political stability.” The Trudeau government used this stability to funnel billions of dollars of weapons to the far-right Kiev regime and spearhead a crackdown on opponents of the Gaza genocide, who have been smeared as antisemites.

As the US and Britain prepare to approve Ukraine using their missiles and their targeting and logistical support to mount long-range missile strikes deep within Russia, Trudeau has publicly proclaimed Canada's full support. The fact that no one in parliament has seen to criticise this reckless escalation, which would amount to initiating direct war between NATO and Russia, underscores that the entire political establishment is ready to risk a world war, including the use of nuclear weapons to

advance Canadian imperialism's predatory global aims.

Throughout Trudeau's period in office, the backing of Canada's trade union bureaucracy for his government has been decisive. The Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor campaigned for its election in 2015, under the "Anybody But Conservative" banner, and helped shape the government's efforts to consolidate a North American trade bloc to serve as the basis for aggressive trade war and military operations against Washington's and Ottawa's rivals around the world.

They have also sabotaged every major working class struggle, isolating them, insisting that workers' jobs, wages and working conditions must be subordinated to corporate profit and "competitiveness," and working might and main to prevent them from becoming the catalyst for a working class challenge to the government and the ruling class agenda of "fiscal discipline" at home and imperialist war abroad.

When the government, working hand in glove with the employers, has used the arbitrary powers of the state to criminalize worker job action, as in the cases of Canada Post workers, Port of Montreal dockers, West Coast longshore workers and most recently railway workers, they have ordered workers to submit.

### **NDP leader Singh's theatrics and the unions' suppression of the class struggle**

Earlier this month, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh declared he had "ripped up" the confidence-and-supply agreement with the Liberals. But this was all political theatre—a maneuver undertaken to better position the NDP and its sponsors in the union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle and to protect the party from electoral oblivion.

In no way did it represent a break from the labour bureaucrats' political alliance with the Canadian ruling elite's traditional preferred party of government.

At the press conference at which he announced the formal breaking of the NDP-Liberal governmental alliance, Singh refused to commit to bringing down the government any time before the scheduled October 2025 election. Nor would he, or could he, explain what policy differences he has with Trudeau.

Instead, he touted the tiny increases in social spending the NDP supposedly wrenched from the government in exchange for keeping it in power and declared that he would fight the next election against "Conservative cuts." This is only another way of presenting the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Tories.

No less significant was the reaction of CLC President Bea Bruske to the ending of the agreement. In a September 14 statement, the head of Canada's largest union federation, hailed the two-and-a-half-year agreement in glowing terms and held out the prospect of its renewal sooner rather than later. It had produced "real progress that has tangibly made the lives of Canadians better," an assertion that she failed to square with the explosion in military spending, growth of poverty and social inequality, further deterioration in public services, and government intervention to break strikes that characterized the period of the agreement.

After a lengthy denunciation of Poilievre and the Tories as anti-worker, and without so much as a mention of Trudeau, Bruske asserted, "Canadians will face a crucial choice in the next election. As we look ahead, we need leaders who will genuinely advocate for workers and come together to solve the problems facing Canadians."

Bruske's line that we need leaders and parties to "come together" to stop the big bad Tories has been the course advocated by Canada's union bureaucracy for the past 30 years. Far from halting the rightward lurch of

official politics, it has facilitated it, by keeping the working class politically muzzled, enabling the ruling class to advance its agenda and handing the initiative to the most reactionary political forces.

This was the line used to demobilize and disorient the mass movement that developed in Ontario against the hard-right Mike Harris Tory government of the late 1990s; the opposition that emerged among key sections of workers to the restructuring of class relations following the 2008 global economic crisis; and, more recently, the mass struggles triggered by the ruling elite's "profits before lives" pandemic policy, and turn to imperialist war and support for genocide.

Over the past two years, a militant wave of workers' struggles has swept across all sectors of the economy. From education support workers in Ontario, to dockworkers on the West Coast, rail workers across the country, public sector workers in Quebec, and autoworkers at the Detroit Three's operations in southern Ontario, workers have taken determined strike action.

These strikes invariably came up against the sabotage of the union apparatus and, more often than not, the open intervention of the state against them. To prevail in these struggles, workers needed to take them into their own hands through the building of rank-and-file committees and advance a strategy to broaden them, mobilize working class support across Canada and internationally, defy state strikebreaking, and develop a working class industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity and war.

These struggles have once again demonstrated the immense social power of the working class, with big business demanding worker job actions be illegalized because they are "crippling" or "paralyzing" economic life. Moreover, they have developed as part of a growing global movement of the working class, that has unfolded in the United States and Europe just as forcefully.

### **The political challenge facing the working class**

However, this objective reality must be made conscious in workers' minds and animate their actions. The great weakness of the strike wave up to this point is that it has yet to break politically— notwithstanding workers' hostility towards individual trade union bureaucrats or unions—from the nationalist, pro-capitalist trade unionist perspective and the bureaucracy's alliance for capitalist fiscal responsibility and imperialist war with the big business Liberals and NDP.

The fight for this political realignment on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program assumes ever greater urgency. All the more so because the alternative is the strengthening of far-right forces and the promotion of anti-immigrant chauvinism and ethno-linguistic differences to pit workers against each other.

This danger was underscored in Monday's by-elections. The decisive repudiation of the Liberals in their Montreal stronghold resulted in the victory of the chauvinist BQ, whose sister party the PQ has been promoting as a Québécois version of the fascist "great replacement theory," claiming immigrants are an "existential threat to the Quebec nation." While the BQ-PQ fully support the war agenda of Canadian imperialism, as long as Quebec gets its *juste part* (rightful share) of armaments contracts, they, with the aid of the union bureaucracy, stoke animosities between French-speaking and English-speaking workers in order to convince Quebec workers that they have more in common with their French-speaking bosses than workers across Canada. This perspective was summed up by PQ leader Paul St. Pierre-Plamondon, who declared, after the BQ by-election victory for which he campaigned, that Ottawa is a "hostile environment" where Quebecers are always on the

“defensive.”

In Winnipeg, the fall in support for the NDP and Liberals produced significant gains for the Tories, who like their Republican Party colleagues in the United States are increasingly morphing into a far-right, fascistic movement. Tory leader Pierre Poilievre, who is far ahead in the polls and has been demanding early elections for months, emerged as party leader due to his role as a strident advocate for the fascist-led “Freedom” Convoy that occupied downtown Ottawa in January-February 2022 and whose initiators demanded the installation of a junta to abolish COVID-19 public health measures.

The ability of such political trash to go on the offensive is thanks above all to the paralyzing impact on the working class of the union-NDP-Liberal alliance. A resolute struggle to politically clarify the working class as to how this alliance serves as a critical mechanism through which the ruling class suppresses the class struggle will lay the basis for the development of new organizations of class struggle and the independent political mobilization of Canadian workers alongside their class brothers and sisters in the United States and internationally in opposition to capitalist barbarism and for the socialist transformation of society.



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