



The New Democratic Party and Labor Political Action in Canada

■ *Elaine Bernard*

Political humorist Barry Crimmins recently remarked that the Perot phenomenon in the last Presidential election showed the depressing state of U.S. politics. “Who would have thought,” shrugged Crimmins, “that the development of a third party would reduce political choice?” Many U.S. union progressives have envied their Canadian counterparts’ success in building an enduring labor-based political party—the New Democratic Party (NDP). They look to Canada and the NDP as proof that labor and democratic socialist ideas can win a wide hearing and acceptance in North America. As U.S. activists learn about Canada’s more progressive labor laws, the national system of universal publicly funded single-payer health care coverage, and the more generous and extensive entitlement programs, they naturally look to labor’s political power and the role of the labor-supported New Democratic Party in winning many of these reforms and promoting progressive social change in Canada.

Yet most activists in the U.S. know little about the 33-year history of the NDP, the struggles that took place within the Canadian labor movement over the party’s creation, and the continuing evolution of

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the relationship between organized labor and the party. Americans tend to be particularly puzzled by Canadian labor activists' critical attitude towards Canada's "labor party." News of developments from north of the border over the last few years has been particularly confounding.

The NDP is currently the provincial government in three out of 10 provinces—Ontario, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan—which together account for approximately 50% of Canada's population and more than half of the country's gross domestic product. Yet in spite of this powerful provincial base, in last fall's federal election, the party suffered its worst defeat since it was founded—polling a mere 6% of the popular vote and dropping from 43 to nine seats in the House of Commons. This dramatic dive in the federal party's fortunes also reflects growing labor dissatisfaction with NDP provincial governments. For the first time in three decades, the Canadian Labour Congress and many of the provincial labor federations are reconsidering their relationship to the NDP. For Americans interested in labor political action and the role of labor parties, these Canadian discussions have great relevance.

ROOTS IN A FARM-LABOR-SOCIALIST TRADITION

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 Labour 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, including universal single payer health care, collective bargaining rights for public employees (including the right to strike), and 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.

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

partisanship”—no affiliation or special relationship with any political party. The Canadian Congress of Labour, 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, the debate over political action and support for the CCF continued to divide 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 calling 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 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 labor movement would 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 with formal party affiliations). The party adopted a constitution that 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 convention-delegate allocation that 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 possible overrepresentation by union activists.

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, these governments achieved 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 economic development and Canadian independence. In 1961, at the time of NDP’s founding, 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 with 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. 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 derived from its “waffling” on whether to call for

Canadian workers to break from 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, and the rights of indigenous peoples and the Quebecois. 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 not 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 viewed the NDP as an "English Canadian" federalist party, opposed to Quebec's national aspirations.

Aside from policy differences, the Waffle promoted a different image of the party, one that sought to break from its narrow parliamentary mold. They mobilized party activists to join anti-war and pro-choice rallies, support labor militants, and publish press releases and political statements. These 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—expelling it from the party. A generation of militant activists and left intellectuals quit the NDP with the Waffle expulsion in 1972, and the rancor the incident generated 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 NDP's problem in defining its relationship to popular movements. At its best, the NDP is a broad political coalition—unlike anything in the U.S.—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 formulate a comprehensive political program beyond 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 groups, the movements have their own base and organization outside of the party. They can invigorate party activists and 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, in particular, fears the social movements, worrying that they will push the party too far, too fast—giving it the image of being “captured by special interests,” too radical or too far left. A related charge, which arose in the last few federal elections, is that these movements draw party activists into single-issue and protest campaigns that drain activist energy and resources and do not translate into voter support for the NDP at election time.

Disagreements between those holding elected office and the grassroots tend to be a permanent feature of most social democratic parties worldwide, with the breach widening when the party is in power and easing when it is not. Organizationally, some of these tensions can be eased by building structures to promote meaningful consultation and collaboration. But at the roots of the problem are profound political differences about the party's mission and how social change is achieved. At one extreme, generally favored by those holding elected office, the party is viewed as an electoral machine 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 promotes environmentalism within the party. While these groups have promoted important political discussions both within and outside of the party, 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 task force to evaluate the relationship between the two organizations. But with a change of federal party leadership and with a number of provincial elections on the horizon, these badly needed discussions were cut short and resulted in a simple 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, 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 this 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 single-payer, no-fault 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 Labour, the Social Contract Act canceled all public-sector contracts and forced \$2 billion in concessions on union members. The 900,000 public-sector workers in the province were handed a three-year wage freeze and an additional 12 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 Labour, 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 extraordinary 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 pessimism inside of labor and in popular movements as to whether government—any government—can stem the tide of corporate power.

In place of affiliation to the NDP, some in the labor movement are suggesting that Canadian labor 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 penalizing your enemies." The latter is the current strategy of a group of building-trades unions outside of the CLC and affiliated to the Canadian Federation of Labour. Alternatively, the OFL adopted a convention resolution calling for coalition work and participation in "broad-based coalitions to ensure all governments are responsive to our agenda." There has even been a suggestion that labor look to form a new labor party in Canada.

To take these arguments in reverse order, it's difficult to imagine that Canadian labor will launch a "new labor party" when it appears to have not yet fully come to grips with what the problems are with the one it has. If labor and the NDP decide that a major realignment and restructuring is needed, it should be preceded by an even more thorough debate and discussion of the sort 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.

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 a hearing from government. This Gompertist approach—syndicalist in its essence—condemns labor to being forever on the outside. Canadian labor has had too much positive experience at the provincial level to abandon the political arena for long. Labor needs a strategy for government—one that would meet the needs of all working people. 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 legitimate political issues,

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. Canadian unions are far from perfect, and they are often leery of and occasionally even hostile to the new social movements. But through the NDP, movement activists and trade unionists have learned to work together, building the trust and experience necessary to work in coalition—even beyond the parliamentary and electoral concerns of the NDP. Politics is, after all, about 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 has provided the pressure and cohesion to keep these disparate groups together. The greatly different organizational practices and beliefs of the groups and individuals affiliated with the NDP create a constant—but ultimately healthy—tension in the party, 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 the society more just and equitable.

CONCLUSION

For organized labor, winning elections and forming governments have not been the main tactical reason for labor having its own party. After all, when measured by the sole criterion of being able to “win” elections, the party has been a failure in most provinces for most of its history. 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 has been both an aid and a barrier to 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 decisionmaking. It must champion economic democracy and popular planning. This agenda will require the party to move beyond parliamentarism and to support, build, and work with the popular movements, both when the party is the 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 people in support of progressive social change as a counter to business. It is no longer in the hands of social democratic governments to deliver on reform. Rather, the party must help to strengthen the social movements that create the climate and momentum for change. As long as the NDP views 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 dissent. Rather, the party needs to see itself as a disciplined coalition of these progressive movements and actively seek to strengthen their influence inside government.

Increasingly, labor needs a political strategy. There is nothing that can be won on the bargaining table that cannot be taken away through legislation or regulation. And if it is to reach beyond its own institutional ranks to build a partnership with other community and progressive organizations, labor must develop its own vision and program for society. That requires political action, which is difficult to imagine outside the context of a political party. ■