

Contents

- 465. Proposal to Restrict Refugee Rights in Canada Hits Roadblock
Roger Annis
 - 466. Review: Putting humans back into socialism
Federico Fuentes
 - 467. ‘Ask Afghans what would help them, don’t ask Karzai’
John Riddell
 - 468. Internal Revolt Shakes B.C. NDP, Labour Movement
Roger Annis
-

Socialist Voice #465, December 7, 2010

Proposal to Restrict Refugee Rights in Canada Hits Roadblock

by Roger Annis

The Conservative Party government in Ottawa has failed in an effort to stiffen Canada’s refugee laws and make the country less welcome to asylum seekers.

The proposed Bill C-49 would have criminalized asylum seekers to Canada arriving via non-supervised methods, such as aboard ships. They would be subject to mandatory jailing for one year and be unable to apply for permanent residency for five years. Without permanent residency, they could not travel abroad or sponsor family members to move to Canada.

The bill seems destined to die after the Liberal Party, the largest opposition party in Parliament, announced on December 1 that it would not support it. The New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois already opposed the bill but did not have enough elected members to block it.

The drafting of Bill C-49 was sparked by the arrival of nearly 500 Tamil asylum seekers on Canada’s west coast last August aboard the *MV Sun Sea*. The creaking ship made a harrowing crossing of the Pacific Ocean.

In the weeks that followed, the Tamils were vilified by the Conservative government. They were called “queue jumpers” and participants in a “criminal syndicate” of “human traffickers.” Many, it was suggested, were “terrorists,” that is, members or backers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the largest political and armed organization of the oppressed Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. It is a prescribed organization under Canada’s anti-terrorism laws.

Most of the people on board the ship remain in detention. As a recent article in the Australian *Green Left Weekly* by writer Lee Yu Kyung documents, asylum seekers whose applications to Australia have been refused and who have been returned to Sri Lanka are being tortured and otherwise abused.

After the Liberals announced they would not support Bill C-49, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said he and his government would fight on. “Canadians are still very concerned about

this country being targeted by smuggling syndicates, by the systematic abuse of the fairness and integrity of our immigration system by the smuggling syndicates and, frankly, their customers....

“We will not give up on this strong but reasonable effort to stop the smugglers from targeting Canada.”

The Liberals say they are willing to work with the government in fashioning a bipartisan bill to crack down on “human smugglers.” But party leader Michael Ignatieff said, “We feel very strongly it [the bill] is punishing the wrong people.”

The term “human smuggler” is a catch-all phrase being used by politicians to confuse and divide public opinion, saying that the person who facilitates the arrival of a refugee escaping persecution is equivalent to someone directing young, foreign women into prostitution. The phrase is intended to divide public opinion, which in Canada is very supportive of refugee rights.

The government and the Liberal Party agree that restrictions are required so that most, if not all, applications for asylum to Canada are made outside its borders. The problem for both is that international law does not allow for such distinction. Once someone lands on Canada’s shores, according to international convention, he or she has the same rights as someone who applies at a Canadian embassy, consulate or UN agency abroad.

The Liberals said they decided to oppose Bill C-49 because they were convinced it would not hold up in court. Indeed, though it was not reported in Canada, Australia’s High Court ruled on November 11 against provisions in that the country’s restrictive Refugee Status Assessment (RSA). The court upheld a case put by two Tamil asylum seekers whose claims for asylum had been rejected. They had been denied the right to challenge their rejected claims in court because they had arrived in Australia by boat.

Australia’s RSA process discriminates between asylum seekers who arrive by boat, known as “irregular arrivals,” and those who arrive by other means, such as by plane. “Irregular arrivals” have greatly restricted rights to appeal if their claim for refugee status is rejected.

Changes to Australia’s Migration Act were introduced in 2001 that excised thousands of island possessions from provisions of the country’s immigration laws. Australia has established internment camps on some of those territories, including the colony of Christmas Island. Boat arrivals are taken there. The law imposes mandatory detention and fewer rights to such “irregular arrivals.”

The High Court found that one of the errors of the RSA process is that both the first stage RSA decision maker and the second stage reviewer treated the country’s Migration Act and decisions of Australian courts as no more than guidelines to their decisions. In fact, each was bound by the Act and by previous court decisions.

The court decision does not restore the rights of judicial review taken away by the 2001 changes. Only the government can do that, and it is fiercely resisting doing so, despite considerable opposition to its policies by Australians as well as international critics. The ultimate decision to deport failed refugee claimants was left to the immigration minister’s discretion.

Jason Kenney and other Canadian government officials made extensive visits to Australia in the weeks following the *Sun Sea*'s arrival to learn from that country's experience.

Despite the seeming demise of Bill C-49, one consequence of the government drive to degrade the rights of asylum seekers has been the decline in acceptance of refugee claims by Tamils in Canada. The acceptance rate for each of the 18 months preceding August 2010 was greater than 80 percent in all months and 90 percent in some. In August, 2010, it dropped to 75 percent, then to 47 percent in September. These figures do not include any applicants from the *Sun Sea*.

Canada backs many of the repressive governments in the world, including Sri Lanka's, that are responsible for producing so many refugees. It is also one of the leading culprits in the sharp rise of climate refugees that is anticipated across the globe in the coming decades. According to a new study, within the next 20 years ten million people a year will be extremely vulnerable to desertification and sea-level rise and will be driven to seek relocation. The Climate Vulnerability Monitor was published on December 3.

++++

Background

Two eyewitness articles by Lee Yu Kyung on the repressive conditions in which the Tamil people of Sri Lanka are living since the bloody conclusion of that country's civil war last year were recently published in Australia's *Green Left Weekly*:

- Sri Lanka: Thousands of Tamils still detained, torture alleged, October 31, 2010
- Sri Lanka: Resettlement, reconciliation in limbo, November 7, 2010.

For more on the aftermath of the arrival of the MV Sun Sea in Canada, see

- Rallies in Vancouver Protest Continued Detention of Tamil Asylum Seekers, *Socialist Voice*, October 12, 2010.

Socialist Voice #466, December 12, 2010

Review: Putting humans back into socialism

Michael Lebowitz

The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development.

Monthly Review Press, 2010

Reviewed by Federico Fuentes

This review of an important and controversial new book first appeared in Green Left Weekly, December 5, 2010. Socialist Voice believes it merits widespread discussion, and we encourage all readers to post their comments in the Feedback section at the end of the article.

The onset of the global economic crisis in mid 2008, symbolised by the collapse of some of Wall Street's most iconic companies, led to soaring sales of Karl Marx's seminal work *Das Kapital*, as many sought explanations to the tumultuous events unfolding.

Although written more than 100 years ago, this devastating and insightful dissection of how capital functions is still a powerful tool for people looking to understand and change the world.

Marx's aim was to provide a handbook for working-class activists that unravelled the logic of capital and its inherently exploitative nature. Marx said this was necessary because as long as workers did not understand that capital was the result of their exploitation, they would not be able to defeat their enemy.

Michael Lebowitz's latest book, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* says it is essential also to investigate the important insights Marx made regarding the alternative. This easily accessible book is written to provide young and working-class socialist militants a weapon in their struggle for a better world.

It is hard to agree more with Bill Fletcher Jr., when he says this book "should be the focus of discussion groups of activists as they attempt to unite their radical practice with theorising a radical, democratic and Marxist alternative for the future."

Lebowitz rejects the old saying that "if we don't know where we want to go, any path will take us there." Rather, if you don't know where you are going, no path will lead you there. Lebowitz says: "The purpose of this book is to point to an alternative path" focused on the "full development of human potential."

Pulling together the different threads in Marx's various sketches on socialism, and drawing on his own personal experiences and studies on "real existing socialism," social democracy, and most importantly, Venezuela's struggle for a new socialism for the 21st century, *The Socialist Alternative* aims to "develop a general vision of socialism and concrete directions for struggle."

Lebowitz's idea of socialism breaks from the dominant vision that prioritises "the development of productive forces" that, supposedly, will one day provide abundance and "allow everyone to consume and consume in accordance with their needs."

Instead, he places humans at the centre of its focus.

The book does not set out to be about the Bolivarian process in Venezuela — Lebowitz has lived in Venezuela since 2004 — but many of the ideas in it will be familiar to those acquainted with the ideas being debated today within a mass movement where the idea of socialism has gripped the mind of the masses and converted itself into a material force for change.

The idea that self-emancipation and struggle are the keys to changing the world and people is essential to Lebowitz's argument. Citing Friedrich Engels, Lebowitz maintains that the aim of communists is "to organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capacities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic condition of this society."

The only way to do so is through "revolutionary practice" because human development is not a gift given from on high. Marx explained that revolutionary struggle produces a simultaneous "changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change."

Put another way, "without the protagonism that transforms people, you cannot produce the people who belong in the good society ... and understand that the development of the human capacities on the one side [cannot be] based on the restriction of development on the other."

Capitalism offers no alternative in this regard. Rather, it is a system based on a "vicious cycle." People have real needs but do not possess the means to satisfy them. They are therefore forced to work for those that do (capitalists) and compete against others in repetitive labour, so as to be able to buy at least some of the products they need.

Lebowitz says:

"Add to this the fact that workers' needs to consume grow as a result of the combination of the alienation (the impoverishment, the "complete emptying-out) characteristic of capitalist production and the constant generation of new needs by capital in its attempt to sell commodities, and it is easy to see why workers are compelled to continually present themselves in the labour market."

This vicious cycle never stops under capitalism. Capital requires workers to see the cycle as a "normal" part of life. "The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirement of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws," wrote Marx in *Capital*.

Today however, capital is haunted by the spectre of "socialism for the 21st century." Drawing on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and what he calls "the elementary triangle of socialism" — social ownership of the means of production, social production organised by workers, and production for communal needs — Lebowitz outlines what is at the heart of this radical alternative for the 21st century.

Private ownership of the means of production must be replaced with social ownership of the products of social heritage and social labour as the “only way to ensure that these are used in the interests of society and not for private gain”.

But social and state ownership are not the same. A real socialist alternative requires a “profound democracy from below rather than decisions by a state that stands over and above society”, where all workers are able to develop their human capacities.

Critical to this is the second side of the triangle: social production.

In opposition to the command-and-obey workplace, a socialist alternative must be based on the replacement of the division of labour between those that think (intellectual labour) and those that do (manual labour). This artificial division can best be overcome with collective democratic decision-making in the workplace.

To complete the triangle of social ownership and worker management, Lebowitz says productive activity must be geared towards the needs of others. That is, the creation of a society based on solidarity, where there is an exchange “not of exchange values but ‘of activities, determined by communal needs and communal purposes’”.

The second half of the book deals with how we get there: “Knowing where you want to go is only the first part; it’s not at all the same as knowing how to get there.” Here again, Lebowitz puts stress on revolutionary practice. He says the impulse for the development of socialism must be the drive of workers for their own human development. Workers need not only “seize possession of production” to introduce worker management and communal production. They also need to “seize possession of the state” and conquer political power.

As the *Communist Manifesto* says: “The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class.” From this position of power, “the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state”.

The experience of the Paris Commune convinced Marx and Engels workers could not use the ready existing state for its own purposes; rather it had to be smashed and replaced by a new state of “self-working and self-governing communes.” So the struggle for a socialist transformation must unfold on two fronts: within the state that owns the means of production, and in the workplaces.

But the struggle also unfolds within the context of an emerging new society that is, said Marx, “economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old [capitalist] society from whose womb it emerges.” For the struggle to succeed, it is vital to fight consciously against the “defects” inherited from the old society and subordinate — rather than try to use — these defects to one’s ends.

Lebowitz is opposed to a vision of socialism that suggests it must pass through distinct stages, where priority is first given to developing the productive forces to create a world of abundance, and says this was not Marx’s view.

Chapter six, “Making a path to socialism,” offers a kind of transitional program for socialism in the 21st century. Lebowitz’s starting point is that the transition towards socialism must move forward simultaneously on all three fronts of the socialist triangle. He says every concrete measure must serve to change circumstances while helping to produce revolutionary subjects and raise their capacities.

“Only in a revolution”, wrote Marx and Engels, can the working class “succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew”.

Threats to this revolutionary process are always present from counter-revolutionary capitalist elements, the tendency of bureaucrats to “seize production” for themselves and the tendency to rely on the market to resolve problems. To combat this, a “socialist mode of regulation” is essential to allow socialism to subordinate all elements of society to itself, and create the organs it still lacks.

This encompasses an ideological struggle against capitalism and for socialism (“The Battle of Ideas”); the creation of worker and community councils where people can organise to change their circumstances and themselves at the same time; and “a state that supports this struggle ideologically, economically, and militarily and thus serves as the midwife for the birth of the new society”.

At this point, Lebowitz asks a central question: “What do we mean by the state?”

“We have to talk about two states here — one, the state that workers captured at the outset and that initiates despotic inroads upon capital, that is, the old state; and, second, the emerging new state based upon workers councils and neighborhood councils as its cells.

“The two must coexist and interact throughout this process of becoming.

“The inherent tension between these two states — between the top-down orientation from within the old state and the bottom-up emphasis of the workers and community councils — is obvious.”

“Yet”, Lebowitz argues adamantly, “that tension is not the principle contradiction”.

Given the presence of revolutionaries in the old state, it would be an error to act as if it was the same as the capitalist state. Similarly, it would be a mistake to ignore the vices of the old society present in the embryonic forms of the new state. The struggle against bureaucrats seeking to defend their privileges or ideological inertia will unfold within both states.

At the same time, Lebowitz says, “interaction between the two states is essential.” The old state has the advantage of being able to see the picture as a whole and concentrate forces, but it also has a tendency to act from above and prioritise expediency over revolutionary practice. The new organs can identify “the needs and capacities of people and can mobilise people to link those needs and capacities directly.”

But there is also a tendency towards localism and the new emerging state “is not capable at the outset of making essential decisions that require concentration and coordination of forces.”

Critical to all this is a political instrument — or political party — that can provide leadership. This is needed because a society marked by the vices of the old cannot produce a process where all workers become socialists at the same time.

But a new kind of leadership that :

“fosters revolutionary practice only by continuously learning from below. There is, in short, a process of interaction, a dialectic between the political instrument and popular movements.

“By itself, the former becomes a process of command from above; by itself, the latter cannot develop a concept of the whole — that is, it cannot transcend localism.”

The Socialist Alternative is an inspiring and insightful contribution to the discussion of rebuilding the socialist project in light of past failures and the current challenges facing anti-capitalist activists everywhere.

No doubt here in Australia, in the context of the resources boom and the growing environmental crisis, the ideas raised in the book regarding social ownership and the need to struggle for transparency – “open the books” – will provide much food for thought for ecosocialists in the battles that lie ahead of us.

Socialist Voice #467, December 12, 2010

‘Ask Afghans what would help them, don’t ask Karzai’

by John Riddell

Mike Skinner, co-founder of the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group and a researcher at the York Centre for International and Security Studies in Toronto, believes a simple question is being left out the debate about Canada’s continued military involvement in Afghanistan. “Why are we there?”

It is a no-brainer to ask this but there are no easy answers it appears.

To understand the goals of Canada’s role, he said, we need to examine the forms of intervention under current consideration as alternatives to Ottawa’s combat mission in Kandahar. During extensive travels in Afghanistan in 2007, Skinner studied firsthand Canada’s intervention, assisted by Afghan-Canadian reporter Hamayon Rastgar, and has written widely on this question. The two men formed, along with fellow-researcher Angela Joya, the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group.

When considering the example of Canada’s supposed “humanitarian” aid projects, which the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois propose as an alternative to a military mission, Skinner emphasises the limitations of the approach and the bad feelings it can engender.

“Canadian aid agencies in Afghanistan have to follow the orders of the military,” he says. “Aid is meted out as rewards to co-operative communities and withdrawn from others as punishment.”

It was not always the case. “Canadian development and aid agencies — like Care Canada and the Red Cross — had been working in Afghanistan, through all the upheavals in government, the Soviet occupation, and then, after 1992, the Mujahedeen period, and, after 1996, under the Taliban regime. “They operated in very difficult conditions, negotiating with the government in power,” Skinner says.

NGOs conscripted to military service

“In 2008, these organizations were told that humanitarian operations had to serve military purposes. If they did not, they would be in ‘very threatening circumstances,’” Skinner says. In effect, the non-governmental organizations were constrained to become part of the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency program.

NGOs also were imperilled by “special ops” — secret strike forces of the Canadian and U.S. armies. “U.S. special forces have impersonated NGO workers, posing as civilians,” Skinner says. When fighters resisting the U.S.-led occupation see this, all NGO workers become suspect in their eyes.

“NGOs began protesting against these practices as early as 2004.” In 2008, “many NGOs, including Care Canada and the Red Cross, pulled out from conflict zones in Afghanistan.”

Under the Obama presidency, U.S. military control of “humanitarian aid” was heightened. Eight NGOs including Care and OXFAM criticized the use of “aid as a weapons system” in a joint

statement released in Jan. 2010. In February, United Nations aid officials refused to co-operate with U.S.-led military operations, which the UN officials describe as the “militarization” of Afghan Aid.

In the early stages of the war, the occupation of Afghanistan consisted of two separate operations, Skinner explains. “There was OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) — the original invasion carried out by the Anglo-Saxon states: the U.S., Britain, Canada, and Australia.” OEF, organized under the umbrella of GWOT (Global War on Terror), operates worldwide: it directs the war in Somalia and the decades-old U.S. involvement in civil conflicts in the Philippines. Ominously, OEF/GWOT started up operations in 2008 in the Caribbean and Central America.

“A second parallel mission, sanctioned by the United Nations and under NATO leadership, is the International Security and Assistance Force, which is supposed to conduct ‘peace’ operations and help stabilize the Karzai government. But Obama rolled both operations into one under the command of General [David] Petraeus,” strengthening U.S. military control of “aid” projects.

‘Training’ for what?

As for the military ‘training’ mission favoured by the Conservative and Liberal parties, Skinner asks, “just what are we training Afghan soldiers to do?”

Here we must examine, he said, the record of U.S. training missions around the world in recent decades. “They have immense experience around the world, in the Vietnam war, elsewhere in southeast Asia, and in Latin America. This ‘training’ has had devastating results for the people of these regions.”

The U.S. military have ‘trained’ more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers in their notorious Fort Benning, Georgia, School of the Americas, now renamed WHINSEC (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Co-operation). The school’s alumni include prominent supporters of rightist military coups, repression, torture, and killings directed against democratic movements.

The U.S. and its allies have been ‘training’ Afghan soldiers for almost a decade, Skinner noted. “What is this army for? Simply to control the population by military means,” he suggests. The intent is to ensure that people will consent to massive projects to extract and ship raw materials, which will displace large numbers of residents — “like in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, except that now extermination is not an acceptable option.”

Secret military operations

Unmentioned in the present debate on Canada’s Afghanistan involvement is its Special Operations forces — the 600-member JTF 2 (Joint Task Force Two) and two recently formed units. Such elite units carry out special strike missions, “avoiding any kind of accountability.”

“They are never mentioned in the press or official documentation. Are they operating with the U.S. in covert actions in Pakistan? Probably. But a member of parliament can’t get an answer to that question.”

When Canada ends its “combat mission” in Afghanistan next year, will JTF 2 and other special ops groups be withdrawn? Not necessarily. “It’s not clear.”

A worm's eye view of the occupation

During his 2007 travels in Afghanistan, Skinner interviewed more than a hundred Afghans on their view of the occupation — intellectuals, farmers, miners, university students, shopkeepers, and human rights activists.

“Afghans don't see Canada's involvement as a sudden rush to their aid. Their urgent needs — fresh water, sanitation, basic infrastructure, electricity, telephone — they see little of that. Instead, they see construction of infrastructure for large-scale commercial development,” he notes.

“They are sceptical of electrical development, for example, which is more likely to provide power for smelters, not meet people's needs.”

Canada's signature development project, he said, was the rebuilding of a dam in the Helmand river valley — repairing a U.S.-sponsored development project of the 1950s that had a devastating impact on local farmers and the environment. The repair project “has now been apparently abandoned — a boondoggle for SNC-Lavalin,” the major contractor.

Opinion polls in Afghanistan have shown a majority against the invasion of the country, Skinner adds.

Opening Afghanistan for capitalism

“What was the goal of the invasion?” Skinner asks. “Liberation of women? If that was the goal, it has failed. Build the state? A failure. But on other issues, the invasion has been very successful, and Afghans are quite perceptive of this.”

Afghanistan is “important real estate,” Skinner says. “It sits astride the shortest route between China and Europe, between India and Russia.” Iran, China, and Turkey are all active in Afghanistan, “and they have great economic and social advantages over the Western countries.”

The U.S.-led invasion is part of a two-track policy articulated in the 2008 U.S. National Defense Strategy. The first and preferred track, Skinner notes, is to engage China and Russia within the globalization of capitalism. Failing this, the second track is a “containment policy reminiscent of the Cold War. Occupying Afghanistan serves both purposes of engagement and potential containment.” Previously, “Afghanistan was cut off as a buffer zone; today it is a bridgehead into Eurasia.” For the invading powers human welfare is secondary to the “opening up of Afghanistan to capitalist development.”

What should Canada do?

In Skinner's opinion, under present conditions — foreign occupation, all-out war, and a puppet government — none of the forms of involvement now being considered by Canada's political parties will serve the needs of the Afghan people.

What should Canada do? “Ask Afghans what would help them. Don't ask Karzai, ask the people. That is easy to say but hard to do. We need to open up communications with Afghan organizations on the ground.” There are many such organizations, isolated by the language barrier and silenced by repression. “We have a task here of human solidarity.”

But the first step, Skinner says, is clear: “The Canadian state needs to dissociate itself from the U.S. imperial project in Afghanistan — fully and completely.”

John Riddell is a Toronto-based activist and co-editor of Socialist Voice. This article was first published in rabble.ca

Socialist Voice #468, December 17, 2010

Internal Revolt Shakes B.C. NDP, Labour Movement

By Roger Annis

Two political shakeups have rocked British Columbia in the past two months. First was the resignation of the long-standing premier of the province, Gordon Campbell, on November 3, victim of the fallout of a hated tax he imposed. One month later, the leader of the opposition party, Carole James, was forced to step down by a revolt within her party.

Campbell's Liberal Party will now attempt to rise from the wreckage of the hated consumption tax it imposed in 2009. A new leader will be chosen at a convention early next year, following which the party will claim it has something "new" to offer for voters. A snap election would catch the opposition seriously unprepared.

For its part, the trade union-based New Democratic Party is facing a wrenching decision, namely, whether it wants a new leader and platform that would distinguish it from the government's course. The outgoing leader never did that. A significant section of the party decided it was unlikely it could win government with her at the helm.

But replacing the hated Liberal regime with a government committed to social justice will be a tough political battle for NDP and social activists, facing not only the Liberal Party but also a conservative, entrenched leadership of the NDP/social movement/trade union alliance.

Liberals under the gun

The Liberals' principle undoing has been the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST), announced without prior warning just days after a provincial election held on May 12, 2009. It took effect on July 1, 2010. It taxes the purchases by individuals of many goods and services that were previously exempt, while lifting many production input sales taxes paid by businesses.

The announcement sparked popular outrage and a petition campaign to get rid of it. Seven hundred thousand people signed the petition during the past summer. It was submitted to the provincial Legislature in September.

Under the province's petition law, the government was left with two choices: either submit the petition's demand for recall of the tax to a vote in the Legislature, or call a referendum vote. It opted to buy some time by announcing a referendum vote in September 2011.

But anti-HST organizers were having none of that, not least because the government can change the referendum date on a whim. They have moved ahead with Plan B: Recall of government members of the legislative assembly (MLAs). The campaign is now petitioning to unseat three of those judged most vulnerable, with more to follow.

The government presently holds 47 seats out of 85 in the Legislature.

The government launched a sputtering propaganda campaign in late summer extolling the virtues of the tax. Then on October 27, in a blatant attempt to buy support, it announced a personal income tax cut of 15 percent for the first \$72,000 earned. Nothing worked. The premier's

popularity dropped to the single digits in polls. The prospect of getting rid of Campbell, and the HST, proved far more attractive than any income tax reduction he might offer. Out he went. His announced tax cut was cancelled.

Big business loves the HST. Billions of dollars of taxation will be shifted onto individual taxpayers. It has supported the tax strongly. But it is dismayed at the how badly the government fumbled its implementation. The Liberal leader who replaces Campbell, and the party elected in the next provincial election, will face unrelenting pressure to repeal the tax. For big business, this all sets the very bad precedent that popular will can prevail over capitalist economic policy.

NDP crisis

Several challenges now confront the working class. One, whose interests will be served by a repeal of the HST? The right-wing populists who have dominated the anti-HST campaign are hoping to use popular anger to boost the electoral chances of a more overtly right-wing party than the Liberals. They will use their anti-tax/anti-government message to pressure whoever forms the next government to curtail public services and social programs even more than the Liberals have done.

And two, how can the NDP alliance organize to not only defeat the Liberal government and its hated tax but also elect a new government committed to defending public services and the living standards of working people?

The downfall of Carole James has several origins. There is dissatisfaction within and without the party with the business-friendly course that she has followed since her election as party leader in 2003. There is also opposition within the party, including among its MLAs, with an autocratic internal party regime that brooks little tolerance for differing ideas.

As well, James has lost two elections as party leader, in 2005 and 2009. She resisted pressure to step down after the 2009 loss. Polls show her popularity has remained flat, even in the face of the Liberals' HST meltdown.

Her ouster seemed sealed on December 1 when the party's longest-serving member of the provincial legislature, Jenny Kwan, went public with a searing blast against James' leadership. Kwan said the leader lacked sufficient appeal to lead the party to victory in the post-Campbell election that looms.

Kwan also said that internal party democracy has been squashed. "Debate has been stifled, decision-making centralized, and individual MLAs marginalized."

Twelve other NDP MLAs said they backed her challenge.

The internal battle lines were drawn in October when James booted MLA Bob Simpson out of the NDP caucus for writing a mild criticism of her in his local, weekly newspaper column. He complained she had offered few new ideas in a speech given to the annual convention of the BC Union of Municipalities.

The following month, the MLAs now grouped around Kwan refused to be pressured into a degrading display of public support for James – the wearing of yellow scarves – at a party

provincial council meeting. The meeting voted by a large margin to refuse opposition MLAs' request for a party convention and leadership election.

Few substantive policy differences have emerged between the two MLA groups. Simon Fraser University professor and former federal NDP candidate Kennedy Stewart told CBC Radio on the day of James' resignation, "I have never heard of any discussion of policy differences between the two groups."

Kwan explained in her December 1 open letter, "British Columbians want more than an opportunity to vote the Liberals out of office, they want the chance to choose a party with an inspiring vision and a clear alternative, progressive point of view."

When asked by another CBC interviewer what direction she would like to see for the NDP, she offered nothing different than the mantra of Carole James. "We want to defeat the BC Liberals and we're going to come together to do that."

Bob Simpson told a radio interview on December 6 that the NDP should fight the next election on a platform of "good governance." He has since announced his resignation from the NDP.

Pro-business course of the NDP

Since her election to leader in 2003, James has taken the NDP further along a pro-business course. Laurie Jones of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business praised James during a December 7 CBC Radio interview. She said James has "gone out on a limb" to court business interests and promise they would be looked after under an NDP administration.

British Columbians are rightly wary of such a political course. Big business under the Liberals has devastated British Columbia since their election to office in 2001. The Liberal government has imposed widespread cuts to social services, kept welfare rates and the minimum wage at well below the poverty line, given vast subsidies to environmentally destructive or socially regressive projects such as expansion of fossil fuel production and hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics, and drastically reduced public supervision of the vast forest industry in the province.

Large reductions in income and corporate taxes have made BC the most "business-friendly" jurisdiction in Canada.

All of these measures have been urged by the very business interests in whose partnership James says the future of the province lies.

The NDP stood largely aloof from struggles against the harsh cuts and regressive industrial policies. In her speech to the BC Federation of Labour convention just a few days before her resignation, James staked out few positions on the difficult challenges facing working people.

To the extent the NDP has opposed cuts to social programs, these are usually voiced as opposition to the *timing* or *exact form* that cuts would take. The NDP gave only half-hearted support to strikes of hospital workers in 2004 and teachers in 2005 that could have mobilized the entire province in a general strike showdown with the government. It has offered little by way of alternative to the Liberals environment-wrecking industrial megaprojects.

Even on the hated HST, the NDP has soft-pedaled. It has ridden the wave of the popular revolt and gained in polls as a result, but James said she would not repeal the tax if elected. Right-wing populists have been left to control the message and direction of the anti-tax campaign.

Why the political timidity over the HST? Because the fight against it necessarily requires a clash with big business. The fight also encourages people to look for more radical policy alternatives, including anti-capitalist ones.

A glimpse of where James and her entourage want to take the NDP can be found in municipal politics in the city of Vancouver. An alliance of big business interests and municipal reformers, including leading NDP figures, came together in a party called VISION to win the 2008 election. It oversaw the construction and real estate bonanza leading into the 2010 Winter Olympics. Lots of money flowed to real estate and other capitalist interests, but municipal taxpayers have been left to foot the bills and the city's marginalized population is poorer than ever.

The VISION government has also implemented a significant tax shift mirroring the HST, away from business and onto individual taxpayers.

New ideas needed

James' departure leaves the labour movement adrift. If there was any dissent from her leadership and support for the opposition MLAs, it was not in evidence at the BC Federation of Labour convention which met during the very week in which Kwan and her supporters delivered their bombshell.

The unions have stayed on the sideline of the anti-HST fight, assuming, along with the NDP, that the party would automatically garner the lion's share of the electoral shift resulting from the anti-tax revolt.

But this is playing with fire, and is a betrayal of working class people. In the recent municipal election in Toronto, a rightist politician, Rob Ford, played heavily to working class dissatisfaction with "big government and high taxes." He came out of nowhere, seemingly, to win the mayoralty.

Two reasons for Ford's success were the record of the outgoing and discredited VISION-type mayor, David Miller, whom the union movement backed in the 2003 and 2006 elections, and the tepid, status quo platform of the candidate that the labor movement and NDP backed to replace him this year.

The BC Liberal Party is damaged, but working-class people have yet to organize a campaign for a meaningful, alternative governing course. Surprisingly to many, polls taken since Campbell's resignation show that the Liberals will remain competitive with the NDP if they can pull off a successful public relations drive around a new leader.

A fighting alternative

There are issues and social movements with which the NDP could successfully ally itself. These include:

- Significant protests taking place across the province to cuts in education by teachers, parents, students and elected members of school boards. As well, university and college students are protesting the fact that they now pay more in tuition than corporations pay in earnings taxes.
- A burgeoning environmental movement that opposes the expansion of oil and gas drilling, coal mining and related pipeline and transportation megaprojects; calls for an end to factory farming of salmon that is devastating the wild stocks of the fish; and is fighting for expansion of public transit in the Vancouver region instead of more highways.
- A broad movement for social housing and other services for the poorest and most needy, including raising of welfare rates and the minimum wage.
- Widespread anger over the violations of democratic principles that have marked the Liberal record, such as the privatization of BC Rail and the imposition of the HST.
- Support for improvements to the electoral system, notably proportional representation.

Championing these social and protest movements is one way for the NDP and trade unions to turn the anti-HST campaign in a positive direction. This would also help reach the fifty percent of eligible voters who no longer participate in elections. Failure to do so leaves the political terrain open to the right wing populists and their dangerous propaganda that blames “taxes” and “big government” for the world’s ills.

There are strong traditions of social struggle in British Columbia that can be drawn upon for such a course. And the broad, fighting movements that are emerging in many European countries provide new inspiration and examples to follow.

One of the keys to success will be to ally with protest movements emerging in other provinces so that the ultimate culprit in socially regressive policies in Canada be targeted – the federal government in Ottawa and the capitalist system it upholds.