

BC NDP Convention: Socialist Policies the Only Way Forward

Contributed by Mike Palecek in Vancouver
Thursday, 15 November 2007

As the BC NDP convention opens, many supporters are wondering what has become of their party. The NDP is slumping in the polls and the stress is starting to show. All the while, the working class is noticeably absent from NDP policy and NDP meetings. With delegate fees to convention costing several hundred dollars, it is easy to see why. The BC NDP has never been so far from its roots – both its grassroots and its historical roots. Only bold socialist policies that answer the problems of every day people can turn the situation around.

As the BC NDP convention opens, many supporters are wondering what has become of their party. The NDP is slumping in the polls and the stress is starting to show. Disagreements are emerging in the caucus; one MLA has been expelled from caucus and others are unhappy with the direction Carole James is heading. All the while, the working class is noticeably absent from NDP policy and NDP meetings. With delegate fees to convention costing several hundred dollars, it is easy to see why. The BC NDP has never been so far from its roots – both its grassroots and its historical roots. Only bold socialist policies that answer the problems of every day people can turn the situation around.

Gordon Campbell has been one of the most hated premiers in the history of the province. His attacks against the working class of British Columbia provoked mass demonstrations and strike action. Tens of thousands flooded into the streets to oppose the right wing agenda. But despite all of this, the NDP has been unable to win back the support of the majority of the province. A recent Mustel poll put the NDP support at just 32% -- down 10% from the last election. Even more surprising is that Carole James's approval rating is actually sitting 2% below Gordon Campbell's, at 40%. For the first time in BC history, the leader of the opposition's approval rating is actually lower than the premier's.

How can this plunge in support be explained? It is all very simple: the leaders of the NDP aren't giving anyone a reason to support them. They criticize the government but don't offer any real alternative. Working class people are facing growing problems in their day-to-day lives, but the NDP leaders have nothing to offer to change this. This, taken with the current economic boom (however unstable), leaves most people with the impression that the best way to improve their lives is to work a little harder and put in more overtime. What other option do people have?

There has been a series of important strikes in the province. The Vancouver city workers, library workers, and coastal forestry workers all walked the picket lines for months. In the past, the NDP would have been there on the lines with the workers, but this time there was hardly a whisper of support. The leadership of the party has been trying to distance itself from organized labour. Carole James even tried to sever the party's ties with the labour movement, but was forced to back off. The NDP bureaucracy sees its connection with labour as a liability. Though they lean on them for support at election time, they prefer to keep that relationship private. In the minds of the party brass, association with the trade union movement will tarnish their image.

But this flies in the face of reality. The link with the labour movement is actually the one thing that is keeping the NDP alive. The working class doesn't identify with disconnected arguments in the legislature or a wishy-washy party programme. The only reason the NDP still has the support it does is that the working class sees it as “their party”. When the NDP has something to offer, the people come out to support them; when they don't, they stay at home. That is the problem the NDP faces in almost every election. They try to win over middle ground and in the end, only alienate their own supporters.

If there was an election held now, the NDP would face an embarrassing defeat. Luckily, the next election isn't tomorrow. We still have time to turn the situation around. Only by adopting socialist policies that meet the needs of the population can we expect to oust Gordon Campbell's government. The problems people are facing are clear; what we need is real solutions to them. If the New Democratic Party demanded free education, childcare, and healthcare while pushing for real improvements to wages and working conditions for the entire population, they would capture the imagination of the province. By laying out a plan to end poverty, unemployment, and shorten the work day, the NDP would inspire a new generation of supporters. If they demanded real change on issues that matter to real people, they could harness all of the anger and frustration that has been building up beneath the surface for the last decade. The groundswell of support for these policies would be unstoppable.

See Also:

- The BC NDP After the Election: Leadership celebrates defeat & threatens to destroy the party by Mike Palecek (1 July 2005)

- Election Day in British Columbia: NDP in trouble by Mike Palecek (17 May 2005)

- The Third Way Raises its Ugly Head in the NDP -- Take back the BC NDP! by Mike Palecek (1 Oct. 2004)
- BC NDP – Bureaucracy maintains stranglehold; Left builds support for future battles (1 Oct. 2003)