

Canadians For Peace and Socialism

The Federal Election Outcome and Beyond

January 31st 2006

An intense discussion is underway on the left to assess, regroup and unite the peace, labour and farm movements to oust the Harper Conservatives from power. Canadians for Peace and Socialism (CPS) offer the following commentary as a contribution to the discussion.

Don Currie, Chair CPS

Alberta Big Oil In Power in Ottawa

The January 23rd 2006 federal election handed legislative power to far right-wing reaction. Objectively the Harper Conservatives are the political expression of the enormous growth and concentration of foreign and domestic finance capital in the energy sector of the Canadian economy. The Harper Conservatives are the federal party of Alberta Big Oil. Their basic mandate is to protect first, the power and privileges of all those who derive their profits from the wealth generated by processing and export of Canadian oil and natural gas reserves to the US market.

The Harper Conservatives cannot promote the corporate goals of the energy sector without confronting the resistance of those sectors of the Canadian capitalist economy struggling to cope with inadequate capital and rising energy prices. The Harper Conservatives are the first capitalist party to be given federal power that places a separate provincial corporate interest above the interests of the capitalist class as a whole. As such it is a divisive political force, a threat to bourgeois democratic federalism, the constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canadian sovereignty and unity. It places U.S high finance in a stronger position of political influence over the Canadian government and state than it has ever had in the past.

The Harperite Conservative rise to power is the result of a carefully orchestrated right wing political process engineered by Alberta academics and politicians working for Big Oil and other western based corporate interests to displace eastern finance capital as the dominant voice of Canadian capitalism in its collaboration with US imperialism. If allowed to remain in power and seize majority control of Parliament Harper's policy will be to subordinate all federal fiscal, monetary, budgetary and foreign policy decisions including those that are crucial to Canada's peace, security and national unity to that separate interest.

Why Capitalist Parties Fight One Another

The Harper Conservatives could not have proceeded to seize power and enact Big Oil's agenda without conducting a political struggle to discredit the Mulroney Conservatives and displace the Liberal Party from federal power. Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien and Paul Martin were all beholden to Bay St. and Montreal corporate power in particular to the Demarais Power Corporation Empire. Their mandate was to perpetuate the

dominance of eastern Canadian finance capital over all national economic development, including NAFTA, and to ensure it controlled and benefited from the movement of investment capital to the western Canadian energy sector. That is why the Liberals were cool to bank mergers aimed at amassing capital for the energy sector. Profits from the oil patch flow south not east.

The oil patch requires massive capital and material and natural resources including water, natural gas, electrical power, structural steel, steel and alloyed pipe, re-bar, welding technology, vehicles and parts, instrumentation, heavy equipment, cement, wood products, plastic, insulation and on and on. It has become a major purchaser of industrial and manufacturing products. The foreign takeover of Dofasco and Stelco are related to this rising demand and the huge profits to be made from controlling the price of hot and cold rolled products, drill stem, line pipe and process piping destined for the oil patch. IPSCO and Sault St. Marie may be next. There is growing competition between the auto sector and the Alberta Oil patch for steel that will drive the price per tonne up and along with it the stock prices for the likes of Mittal, Arcelor and Thyssen Krupp.

The fast rising demand for capital and materials combined with the skyrocketing price for crude and natural gas has shifted the weight of capital concentration away from eastern Canadian manufacturing in particular the auto sector to the oil sands mega-projects, drilling and big pipeline plays such as Imperial Oil's \$7.5 billion MacKenzie Pipeline project as well as lesser but significant plays such as Hibernia and northern BC oil patches.

A CPS supporter, working in the Alberta oil patch, recounts attending a corporate meeting that estimated population growth in Fort McMurray AB will rise from 60,000 to 600,000 in fifteen years. Alberta is expected to reach ten million. These projections may be exaggerated but they are not fanciful. Calgary has just broken the million mark. Twenty years ago it was less than 500,000.

Oil sands technology now available can transport oil sands in slurry over large distances. A \$13.3 billion refinery to process oil transported in slurry is planned for Fort Saskatchewan, 400 miles from Fort McMurray. US investors are aiming to send oil sands slurry directly to US east coast refineries, by-passing Suncor, Syncrude and Edmonton facilities. Underlying some of the leadership struggles now underway among Ralph Klein Conservatives is about whether to promote investment in job creating secondary processing of oil and gas in Alberta or to cave into US majors and promote the downstream processing of raw product in the USA.

Under Harper, bank mergers will proceed including their possible headquartering in Calgary. Harper will be under pressure to cut federal government subsidies to cashed strapped Bombardier, Ford and GM (President Bush has hinted he will let the US auto industry to hang out to dry) in favour of western Canadian pipelines and oil sands mega projects. A review of federal employment and immigration standards to facilitate the free flow of non-union and foreign labour into the oil patch are now in the cards.

The Harper Conservative Political Base

The Government in power in Ottawa is not just Conservative; it is “Harperite” Conservative, an evolving party of right-wing reaction, a peculiar Canadian version of Reagan-Thatcher-Bush neo-conservatism with diverse right wing roots. Its backers in addition to Calgary oil investors are Vancouver based Peter Brown’s BC Canaccord Capital investment empire, (a financial backer of BC Premier Campbell’s rise to power), and Winnipeg based right wing media empire Can West Global and the National Post. Former Socred-Reform-Alliance-Conservative Vancouver MP John Reynolds, who managed the Harper campaign, is touted to become Canadian High Commissioner to the UK where his son lives and is COO to Canaccord Capital (Europe) Ltd. The Reynolds Family trust holds 1,187,641 common shares in Canaccord Capital.

Brian Mulroney Chief of Staff Derek Burney who managed the Harper transition team is former CEO of CAE Inc. (Canadian Aviation Electronics, a major player in flight simulator training for the US and Canadian military) and a board member of Asper Can West Global group. Can West Global is big in Alberta. When the late Izzy Asper, Can West Global founder, took a run at the leadership of the Manitoba Liberals in the early 1970’s his program was: work for welfare; a triple E Senate; abolition of capital gains taxes; a flat rate tax system; constitutional limits on federal debt, deficits, and tax rates. Asper was trounced in provincial elections by the people of Manitoba. The self-proclaimed highlight of this “humble” Winnipegger’s life was to have Can West Global’s stock listed on the NYSE. Can West Global harbor a grudge against the CRTC that refused to grant licenses to Global in the 1990’s. It will be calling in its markers. With Harper in charge the CBC may be on death row.

The Harper Conservatives will be under pressure from the Oil Patch to use federal budget surpluses to increase profit margins on oil sands mega projects in Fort McMurray and BC entrepreneurs will be angling for federal money to guarantee estimated profit margins on the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Both the Oil Patch mega projects and Olympic contractors blame labour costs for so-called cost overruns when in fact it is largely due to unrealistic return on investment (ROI’s) expectations of banks and big investors.

Harper Conservatives - USA, All the Way.

The Harper Conservatives are the most pro-US government since Brian Mulroney was ousted in 1993. To secure and entrench the Alberta partnership with US energy interests, they are capable of massive sell out of Canada’s vital national interests in particular the inclination of the Canadian people to support peace and friendship and solidarity with people struggling for freedom and social and economic justice. To ingratiate themselves with US imperialism, they will send more Canadian youth to die in US wars.

The Harper Government will collaborate with the USA in opposing the left democratic trend in Latin and South America. It will support anti-Cuban reaction and oppose the struggle of the Palestinian people for justice. It will further weaken Canada’s role at the United Nations and strengthen Canada’s involvement in NATO, NORAD and BMD.

Everything the Liberals did surreptitiously and slowly the Conservatives will do overtly and quickly. Harper is Paul Martin in a hurry.

Harper's Formula for National Discord

The Harper Government will retreat from any serious confrontation with US corporate interests to enforce NAFTA rules and will oppose all forces that advocate withdrawing from the agreement. Its policies will aggravate and worsen regional disparity. It will seek a way out of the Atlantic Accord and take its policy cues from the likes of Irving Oil and Premier Williams of Newfoundland-Labrador managing the Hibernia and hydro-electric file in eastern Canada. It will fashion its Quebec policy based on its minority right wing support.

The government in power is the main threat to national unity and in particular to the taxing and legislative power of the federal government. It will renege on its responsibility to enact, fund and enforce national standards for federal social programs that benefit working people, in particular publicly funded health care, public education and Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) and Old Age Security (OAS).

The CPP in particular is in jeopardy. The portion of the plan that has been risked on the stock market has grown. Its essential role is to prop up stock prices of arms manufacturers and to fund high risk ventures turned down by banks. Other corporate interests will be demanding similar consideration and will seek CPP investment to prop up their stock prices. There will be voices inside of government, acting for the large private insurance companies and mutual funds to scrap CPP altogether and transform it into a slush fund for budget deficit reduction, to redress the so-called "fiscal imbalance" and tax reductions for the wealthy.

All of this will be done by "devolving" federal taxing powers to the provinces which will be a no strings attached invitation to provincial governments to enact versions of Harper's federal privatization policies. The civil service is once again under the threat of outsourcing, downsizing and privatization. Harper will be approaching the Bloc for support claiming it addresses Duceppe's concern about the "fiscal imbalance." Jean Charest, a closet Conservative will be strengthened.

Farmers Beware

The Harper Government has no agricultural sector policy except to allow market forces continue to drive farmers out of business. The Wheat Board, marketing boards, direct subsidies to farmers are in peril. Corporate concentration in agriculture will grow.

The election of the Harper Conservatives has been hailed by the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association, (WCWGA) a small 300 member right wing group of wheat producers that have campaigned for years to weaken the role of the Canadian Wheat Board and open up the US and global market in a "winner take all" competition that would result in big producer dominance over smaller operations. Commenting on the

WCWGA press release a CPS farmer supporter in the Swift Current area said, *“It is ironic that these “free enterprisers” who want the government out of their face so they can make money, still want government handouts. It is this grossly contradictory thinking that brings in policies which cause the most devastation for the farmer and working person.”* Another farmer commented, *“It’s a great day for democracy when a group of 300 members gets to set ag policy for the rest of us.”*

Assessing the election aftermath, CPS members in Regina commented that Alberta farm land values are now three times that in Manitoba even though productivity is identical. Farmers in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are going broke and canceling leases on leased land. In the Milestone Saskatchewan area leases on 40,000 acres have not been renewed. The banks will have land and no one to operate it. Canadian farmers are technically advanced but still can’t make a “go” of farming. While stock market investors who don’t work a tap complain about 12.5% ROI while farmers who labour in the fields every day can’t make 5% ROI out of hard work.

Wayne Easter the former minister of agriculture said the farmers need more market control but didn’t say how to do it. Farmers attempting to reduce costs are investing their own money in grain infrastructure, (e.g. rail lines). Citing the intervention of the state in Bolivia to assist the landless, the Regina meeting said that the state here could protect the Wheat Board, re-impose the Crow rate and institute two-price grain as a step towards taking control of the market. *“To do that we have to get rid of the WTO and NAFTA,”* they said. As an example, the CPS group said that Canada is a big exporter of lentils, but the U.S. government is making deals with Canada’s customers in South America, requiring them to impose import duties on Canadian lentils and cut Canadian suppliers out of the market. In another case Saskatchewan farmers in a cooperative effort to reduce costs, invested in hog barns. The bank foreclosed and, with the connivance of the Calvert NDP provincial government, sold the assets to US agricultural corporate giant Tyson for a price less than the farmers had originally invested. The NFU won’t criticize the NDP Government.

David Anderson, right-wing free market Conservative member from Cypress Hills-Grasslands is touted as the next federal minister of agriculture.

Harper’s Ideological Roots

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been influenced by the ideas of neo-fascist ideologue Friedrich Hayek, a theoretical architect of the overthrow of the European socialist system of states. Harper has not repudiated his ideological and faith-based social-conservative roots. On January 12th 2006 he told the Globe and Mail, *“I don’t think my fundamental beliefs have changed in a decade, but certainly my views on individual issues have evolved.”*

The reactionary roots of the Harper Conservatives were well known to everyone on the left prior to the election campaign. Harper was nonetheless given an easy ride in the House of Commons by the NDP and on the hustings in the mistaken belief that the

Conservatives had no chance of forming a minority or majority government and if it did the NDP would emerge as the official opposition. Now that the results are in, one can only hope that some sober second thoughts and self-critical appraisals will be forthcoming from those on the left who demanded that labour and farm voters give total and uncritical support to the NDP election strategy.

Who Has Warned About the Right Danger?

Henry Morgenthaler, a holocaust survivor and champion of women's right to choose, characterized the Harper Conservatives as a "quasi-fascist party." Venerable respected fighter for women's rights, June Callwood said "It takes a decade; it takes two decades to repair the damage done by one right-wing government of this radical kind. I think Harper represents everything I hold to be anti-Canadian." Buzz Hargrove, leader of the Canadian Auto Workers Union warned his membership of the threat posed to their industry and jobs and campaigned publicly to defeat Harper in the federal election. He has been pilloried by the left and ridiculed by the right wing National Post for that realistic stance.

Hargrove was in good company. The Carpenter's Union, Central Ontario Regional Chapter, First People's for Progressive Government, and Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians all warned that a Harper Government will endanger the democratic and social gains of Canadians and the independence of our country. Professor James Laxer of the University of Alberta Lakeland Institute, a left-wing social democratic think tank and Jim Stanford prominent CAW economist sharply criticized Jack Layton and the NDP for muting their attack on the Conservatives during the election.

The People's Voice newspaper of the Communist Party of Canada while continuing its bewildering criticism of Hargrove warned somewhat belatedly in its last pre-election issue that voters "shouldn't jump from the Liberal frying pan into the Tory fire." The speech of Miguel Figueroa in Guelph Ontario on January 19th was exemplary and is the speech that could have made been delivered and should have been delivered on day one of the campaign. Notwithstanding these problems and with full knowledge and awareness of the tremendous effort it takes for a small party to field twenty one candidates and conduct a national campaign, their efforts made on impact on working class awareness. The Communist Party's assessment of the election outcome is basically correct and we recommend that every worker and farmer should read it and distribute it widely.

Voter Outcomes – No Conservative Sweep

The third of the electorate that voted for Harper are a broadly based and diverse electoral coalition, dominated by ambitious professional and small investor classes, cash strapped farmers and small business, acting out of fear that their economic status in Canada can only remain safe and secure within a NAFTA dominated by US finance capital. Bush sycophant and National Post columnist David Frum crows that the main obstacle to improved Canadian US relations a "vacillating" Prime Minister Paul Martin has been removed.

The Conservative Government has a weak mandate. It is regionally based in Alberta and interior BC. It is neither “Pan-Canadian” nor representative of the legitimate national aspirations of the people of Quebec. Quebec Conservative support came from the old Union Nationale strongholds and some Liberal voters angry about scandals. The left of centre Bloc is still strong in Montreal and urban ridings of Quebec. The Harper Conservatives failed to make significant headway in Toronto and lost ground in Vancouver. The Liberals retained much of its traditional electoral support in major cities. The NDP picked up increased support arising from the voter fear of a Conservative majority.

The Context of Power

The Harper Conservatives assume power in the midst of a rapidly developing US economic crisis. It has no plan to defend Canadian economic interests if the US market goes into recession. It has no policy to protect Canadian auto-workers, steel workers, lumber workers, textile workers, manufacturing workers, transportation workers, service sector workers, teachers and professionals, office workers, partially employed, underemployed or unemployed Canadians. It will use large government surpluses to protect the wealthy insiders in the Alberta Oil Patch and abandon the Alberta construction workforce to its fate when the oil sector stalls. Its only concern is that Canadian oil and gas continues to serve US interests.

Finance Capital Soft on the Liberals - Big Oil at the Cabinet Table

The decision of John Manley, Frank McEnna and Brian Tobin to take a pass on the Liberal Party leadership is an indication that big capital is already re-aligning some of its support behind the Conservative Party. Scrambling to collaborate with the new Government are sections of eastern Canadian finance capital in particular real estate, stock brokers and lobbies for the arms industry and the military brass. General Rick Hillier, Chief of Staff for the Canadian Armed Forces, lauded Harper’s election. The Demarais Empire has quietly developed a relationship with Harper during his rise to power. They are attracted to the profits to be made out of Harper’s pledge to leave income trusts untaxed, eliminate capital gains tax, reduce corporate and income taxes and sharply increase military spending. They are represented by the old Mulroneys Conservatives headed by Tory Senator Hugh Segal and Derek Burney. The Canadian Council of Corporate Executives and its mouthpiece Tom D’Aquino hovers in the background assessing eastern Canadian industrial capital options.

The election puts Alberta Oil interests and its US investors at the Canadian Government cabinet table. Former U.S. vice-president Al Gore has warned Canadians, “The election in Canada was partly about the tar sands projects in Alberta. And the financial interests behind the tar sands projects poured a lot of money and support behind an ultra-conservative leader in order to win the election...and to protect their interests.” Gore said he wasn’t surprised about an absence of tar sands talk in the election campaign. “Of course you didn’t hear about it. Media concentration has taken a toll on democratic principles around the world, and Canada is no exception,” Gore apparently is well

informed about the role of Can West Global and the cheerleading role played by CTV and CBC pundits during the election campaign.

President Bush in his January 31, 2006 State of the Union address said it was the goal of the USA to replace 75% of its dependence on Middle-East oil by alternative energy resources. He didn't state the full truth. US energy dependency on Middle East oil will not be replaced by wind, solar or nuclear energy as he suggested, it will, if Dick Cheney has his way, be replaced by the Alberta Oil sands.

Liberal-Labour Coalition Politics and the New Conservative Power

The Liberal Party has a long history of influence in the organized labour movement. It did not begin with Buzz Hargrove and the CAW. Liberal-labour collaboration politics runs through the history of the struggles of the Canadian working class affecting reformist and Communist led unions and even the Communist Party itself at certain stages of its history. This reality deserves some sober analysis under the broad topic of the affects of the influence of reformist ideology in the ranks of labour. It is not useful to shout at the problem and alienate workers under Liberal influence.

Unlike the big tent Liberal Party, the Harper Conservatives have no influential labour, environmental, peace or social justice pressures from inside its ranks. Harper is not as susceptible to pressure from the left democratic movement as were the Liberals. He has never confronted it in his evolution from the far right to his most recent makeover as a right of centre Prime Minister. His entire experience is maneuvering for power within the cocoon of an Alberta based right-wing reactionary political movement.

The NDP and Conservatives

The expectation that the NDP will have the same leverage in Conservative minority government as it did with a Liberal minority government is illusory. The only way the NDP can collaborate with the Conservatives is to move right. The Conservatives will not move left. Unless the left speaks forthrightly to the NDP about its impulse to move right, the 29 NDP Members of Parliament will disappoint and let down its broad electoral support. They have not made an auspicious start.

Following the first NDP post-election caucus meeting, NDP leader Jack Layton said the NDP's role in the House of Commons would be to "balance the changes the Conservatives are bringing." Reiterating the NDP pledge to "represent working families, pensioners and youth" he offered little in the way of a program to carry forward that pledge. Layton focused on the issue of "ethics, reforming the parliamentary process and democratic reform of the election system." Layton called for a parliamentary debate on Afghanistan and that was it. The NDP has yet to characterize the Conservative Government, expose its reactionary roots or attack its Parliamentary program. The NDP thus far, has opted for a passive and reactive role in Parliament. That is not the way to protect their electoral gains and to prepare for more advances in the next election.

A Majority of Canadian Voters Reject Right Wing Extremism and the Separate Interest

Two thirds of the electorate voted for parties other than the Harperite Conservatives in the belief that they were supporting parties that hewed to a vision of Canada's future independent of the global ambitions of US imperialism. Most working class voters were unimpressed with a small cut in the GST or minor tax reductions. For most working people increased purchasing power results from reduced hours of work, wage increases and job security and consumer debt reduction. Canadians supported the universal and federal character of social programs, adequate funding of health care, pensions, child care and education. These are the voters that in one way or another uphold national dignity, and believe in Canadian unity and progressive collective solutions to human needs. They are the majority of Canadians. They are the real opposition party in Canada and they are on a collision course with the new Government.

Defender of Canadian Sovereignty or Collaborator in the New America Century?

Prime Minister Harper's handlers aim to overcome the perception that he is a Canadian collaborator in the project of the New American Century, and reinvent him as a defender of Canadian sovereignty. Harper, ended his Calgary victory speech on January 23rd. 2006 with the cry, "Canada, united, independent and free." A day later, on cue, US Ambassador David Wilkins challenged Canada's sovereignty over the Northwest passage and Harper made the appropriate nationalist response telling reporters, "...but it is the Canadian people we get our mandate from, not the ambassador from the United States."

Is Prime Minister Harper a reliable defender of Canadian sovereignty? On March 20th 2003 in the House of Commons, Harper poured scorn on the views of a majority of Canadians opposed to the US-British war in Iraq. He said, "*We will not be with our government, for this government, in taking the position it has taken, has betrayed Canada's history and its values. Reading only the polls and indulging in juvenile and insecure anti-Americanism, the government has for the first time in our history, left us outside our British and American allies in their time of need.*" Harper intoned, "*In the days that follow may God guide the actions of the President of the United States and the American people; may God save the Queen, her prime minister, and all her subjects; and may God continue to bless Canada.*"

During the Mulroney years, Harper dismissed Canadian nationalism as not representative of "*the values or identity of most Canadians, but is simply the regional culture of Ontario, and the vested interests of central Canada's political elites.*" Speaking before a conference of US social conservatives in 1997 Harper defined Canada as a "*northern European welfare state.*" His notion of national unity was a proposal to erect a firewall around oil rich Alberta urging the Klein Conservatives to opt out of the Canada Health Act and the Canada Pension Plan.

Here is what Harper had to say about Canadian defense policy prior to the 2000 US election that brought George Bush to power. *“For nine years the government has systematically neglected the Canadian forces and undermined our ability to contribute to peace enforcement and even peacekeeping operations, including recently our premature withdrawal from Afghanistan. Most recently we have been inclined to offer knee-jerk resistance to the United States on national missile defense despite the fact that Canada is confronted by the same threats from rogue nations equipped with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction as is the United States. Harper praised Brian Mulroney adding, “he understood a fundamental truth. He understood that mature and intelligent leaders must share the following perspective: the United States is our closest neighbor, our best ally, our biggest customer, and our most consistent friend.”*

It is on the issue of greater defense expenditures that a potential alliance of right wing Liberals and Harper Conservatives in Parliament can occur. A grand Parliamentary coalition of the Angela Merkel, Gerhard Schroeder type in the new Parliament on the issue of Canadian support for US expansionism cannot be discounted.

Underestimating the Conservative Minority

The minority status of the Harperite Conservatives is no reason to take a wait and see attitude before acting to expose and defeat its reactionary program. Nor should the NDP toy with notions of collaboration with Harper. They should be reminded that Harper defined them as a party of liberal Democrats and *“proof that the devil lives and interferes in the affairs of men.”*

From the first day of the 39th Parliament until the next federal election, Harper and his advisors will be biding their time waiting for the optimum moment to go back to the electorate for a Conservative majority. In the interim they can do a lot of damage. We need to remind ourselves that Harper has many options to put his policies in action without a majority. The include:

- Gaining Liberal or Bloc support for fiscal policy
- Using bi-lateral Federal Provincial deals to by-pass Parliament
- Using orders in council to enact legislation
- By-passing Parliament on foreign policy by using the Liberal Government’s Foreign Policy document
- Using NAFTA rules to by-pass Parliament
- Capitalizing as Bush did on some national or international calamity

Mobilize Extra-Parliamentary Pressure.

Everything must be done to expose the reactionary aims of the Harper Conservatives which are so inimical to the best interests of Canada and its working people and to prepare to isolate them in Parliament and defeat them in the next federal election.

The starting point has to be the vital class interests of the Canadian working people. Stephen Harper is remote from the concerns of organized labour, working women, minorities, the poor and homeless. While an assistant to a Calgary Conservative Member of Parliament he worked on proposals to dismantle the unemployment insurance system. He and his supporters attribute poverty to the welfare state and impugn workers by attributing their economic problems to an unwillingness to work harder for less. Harperites do not consider social and economic conditions as the primary cause of crime and family breakdown. Harper is the champion of smug and secure, well to do Canadians who demand government insulate them from the harsh realities of capitalist life while fobbing off all responsibility for rectifying its causes.

The Fight Back Begins

Prime Minister Harper must be exposed, isolated and defeated at the earliest opportunity. The extreme right will be defeated as the organized labour and farm movement step into the leadership of the struggle. The National Farmers Union has called a conference for Regina on February 24-25, 2006 to discuss a fight back strategy to defend the Canadian Wheat Board.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and its Provincial affiliates need to take the fight to the base of support of Harper Conservatives, the Alberta Oil Patch. The CLC should consider an emergency conference with the Alberta Federation of Labour jointly with the combined construction trades unions, in Edmonton or preferably in Fort McMurray to address the conditions of workers on Mega Projects, on plant maintenance, on the drilling rigs, at the gas plants and in the fabricating shops. In particular the CLC must challenge the inroads being made by non-union and company union contractors that permit inhuman lengthening of hours of work, deplorable out of town and camp accommodation.

The so-called Alberta Advantage includes increasing numbers of Alberta workers in all sectors of the economy, succumbing to work related injuries, physical and mental health problems, and family break down, alcoholism and drug use. The long separation of workers from their families in eastern Canada needs to be solved including more frequent and paid turnarounds. Workers in all sectors of the oil patch are desperately in need of rest and longer holidays, improved on site health facilities and decent recreation facilities. Many younger workers need advice on debt management. Families need affordable low housing for those wishing to relocate to Alberta permanently.

Such a conference would address the plight of unorganized low wage earners in Calgary and Edmonton. Low wages and deplorable working conditions in the service, meat packing, restaurant industries and the unorganized sector of the Calgary and Edmonton house construction industry is a national disgrace.

The affect of such a conference would be to tear the mask off the so called Alberta Advantage and begin to reveal the real source of investor profits in the Oil Patch, lengthening of the working day, lagging wage levels and rising personal debt. Such a conference should be followed by a massive lobby on the Klein Government and Alberta

MP's with demands to clean up their act or confront a shut down. The effect of such an action would galvanize and inspire Alberta workers and provide a labour alternative to the corporate Alberta Advantage and set the stage for a coming together of the workers of Quebec, Eastern Canada, Northern and Northwestern Ontario, northern, interior and lower mainland British Columbia who all face similar deteriorating problems.

The Harper Conservatives must be knocked off stride in the earliest days of its minority mandate. They have to be hit and hit hard. They are vulnerable on just about every issue of importance to working people, peace, work and wages, job security, nationalization and public ownership, public health care, women's rights, universal child care.

The progressive left must be the first to take up the challenge. An early conference sponsored by People's Voice with invitations to a spectrum of progressive left forces should be considered. The earlier the better.