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Canada

# Out of the Impasse? The Avi Lewis Campaign and Left Strategy

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**With the near collapse of Canada's federal New Democratic Party (NDP) in the 2025 federal election, the Canadian electoral terrain is today dominated by a tug of war between two forces: a centre-right technocratic and authoritarian pole around Mark Carney's Liberals, and a MAGA-adjacent hard right around Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives. This sometimes substantive, sometimes theatrical clash opens up space for far-right forces who draw inspiration from the advance of racist and fascist elements in the United States and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the American president continues to threaten to subjugate and even annex Canada – threats we shouldn't understate.**

This is also a time of opportunity. To see that potential, one need only look to the global movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people, and to Zohran Mamdani's successful mayoral campaign in New York City, a political breakthrough for the left. It's in this context that, in the Canadian state, journalist and activist Avi Lewis's campaign for the leadership of the NDP has attracted much attention, dedication, and debate.

Lewis has won the support of many left organizers in part because he's taken [bold and promising policy positions on important questions](#). For example, he has argued for steps towards public ownership and democratic control in vital areas of the economy such as housing, food, telecoms, and banking. He has also laid out an ambitious vision for transforming our economy through a green transition that includes employment guarantees for workers exiting the destructive oil and gas industry. He has made the fight for Indigenous rights a central theme of his campaign – as well as the struggle for a free Palestine – and has been vocal about confronting the far right wherever it rears its head.

Yet the deeper value of Lewis's campaign, beyond its policy statements, is its drive to transform the NDP and the way we conduct left-wing politics in this country. Lewis has been clear that his campaign's core project is to build a powerful united movement to defeat the threats we face: to organize solidarity with grassroots protests and strikes, as well as to unite and mobilize support for left candidates at election time. His campaign has also been helpful insofar as it has provided an opportunity for serious debate about left strategy and organization – discussions that have not taken place in Canada on anything approaching a mass, country-wide scale in a very long time.

## Policy and strategy

Small, independent organizations of the activist left in Canada have served as an important training ground for activists and thinkers. Some of today's trade union and social movement leaders have emerged from those spaces. So have a range of campaigners, commentators, and intellectuals.

Yet the independent organizations in Canada to the left of the NDP have been at a strategic impasse for many years. This impasse stems, in part, from a rigid organizational culture and outlook within many of these groups, which may tend to overestimate the political possibilities of a given historical period. These groups are also sometimes unable to root themselves in actually existing struggles without losing their core commitment to developing revolutionary thinking and strategy. Some of these groups race to recruit new members, while others slip into a kind of political quietism, cultivating a self-image as guardians of left orthodoxy while waiting for a popular mass upsurge that never comes – or that appears for a moment, only to bypass these organizations completely before eventually dissipating.

There is an important place for Marxists and revolutionary socialists in the current political landscape in Canada, to be sure. But functioning as a loose network of like-minded activists is an inadequate response to the dangers and opportunities of the present moment. The Lewis campaign seems to us to be an opening in which we might break, or at least shake up, this impasse: a moment when the country's small revolutionary left may connect with far bigger and broader forces.

The NDP has never been a neutral strategic terrain. If Avi Lewis wins the NDP leadership, he will find himself at the helm of a party reshaped by major internal reforms made during the era of previous leader Jack Layton, which aimed to "professionalize" the party and weaken its links to organized labour. The result has been greater powers concentrated in the hands of the party leader and their immediate circle, further marginalizing the role of riding associations, active members, labour organizers, and other layers. This has exacerbated the party's tendency to focus on parliamentary manoeuvring at the expense of other political priorities such as building and maintaining its grassroots base.

The NDP's mix of full-time staffers and consultants have decades of experience with manipulating party procedures to exclude radical resolutions at conventions, and to [prevent individuals](#) with political positions they find undesirable from obtaining nominations at election time. The Ontario NDP [drove out](#) former Hamilton Centre MPP Sarah Jama for her Palestine solidarity, while the British Columbia NDP [disqualified](#) climate justice activist Anjali Appadurai's leadership candidacy. The NDP's history is littered with the cadavers of initiatives that sought to orient the party towards a more left-wing path, from the Waffle of the 1970s to the New Politics Initiative of the early 2000s, to the Leap Manifesto of the 2010s.

Clearly the NDP is not an instrument that can be wielded with ease by Lewis or any left-wing project. Yet there is nothing metaphysical about the party's tendency to disappoint or its success in crushing left-wing insurgencies within its ranks. Like any political party, the NDP is an institution riven by power struggles and beset by contradictions – a strategic terrain where opposing interests struggle for dominance, whether those interests find expression in provincial sections of the party, particular riding associations, or elements of the federal party bureaucracy. Some opponents of Lewis's project might prefer to break up the party, and even join the Liberals, rather than cede ground. It is thus up to Lewis and allied forces to develop a strategy and a coalition capable of taking advantage of those contradictions.

Contrary to the received wisdom one often encounters on the left, the marginalization of the left in the NDP is not entirely due to the party's bureaucratic machinations. While those dynamics were, for example, certainly involved in delivering a [severe blow to the socialist Waffle project at the federal party's 1971 convention](#), the Waffle's initiatives were defeated on the convention floor by votes cast by rank-and-file members. Backers of left-wing initiatives within the NDP cannot be satisfied with denouncing the party's undemocratic practices, as these will inevitably arise. We must be able to anticipate and counter them.

April's devastating federal election result for the NDP dealt a severe blow to the consultants, pollsters, and strategists who have held the party's reins for more than two decades. Not only did the near-complete collapse of the NDP's vote undermine the legitimacy of the internal methods in place since Jack Layton was leader, but the resulting loss of official party status meant the leader's office and the party's research bureau also [lost their funding](#). This situation has been compounded by the fact that the party is heavily indebted. Destabilized and in crisis, the federal NDP may today be more open to a socialist and democratic reorientation than it has been at any point in the last few decades, even if conservative forces within the party will certainly put up a fight.

## Towards a strategy of engagement with the NDP

In public forums and private conversations with organizers, Lewis has acknowledged all these realities. He appears to be alert to how his political project faces serious countervailing forces both within the NDP and beyond it, which will entice the project towards compromise and betrayal of the social movements with which it claims to stand. Accordingly, Lewis has mused about turning the NDP's riding associations into activist hubs, with the aim of building the kind of popular mass networks that can both support his project and pressure it to stick to its declared agenda. He has speculated, alternatively, that building independent or quasi-independent organizations that operate both within and outside the NDP, like the Democratic Socialists of America in the US or Momentum in the UK, may be needed to create such networks and pressure. Lewis is well-versed in socialist political culture and likely keenly aware of the failures of past socialist initiatives in Canada and abroad: the lessons of the Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn campaigns, as well as the experience of the [left-wing Syriza government in Greece](#) or the so-called [Pink Tide left governments in Latin America](#).

At the same time, although the Lewis campaign has spoken frequently about the desirability of building these hubs and independent organizations, laying the groundwork for them has not been a campaign priority so far. Not unreasonably, the campaign has focused on signing up new members and rallying current ones – focused, that is, on winning the NDP leadership contest. While loose local campaign chapters have sprung up across the country, they don't appear to have been centrally involved in shaping campaign strategy. The campaign recently published a high-level [position](#) on party renewal that expresses an intention to transform riding associations into activist hubs, but it remains to be seen whether Lewis will prioritize such an initiative if elected leader.

Time will tell whether this has been the most appropriate organizing model for winning the leadership race. It's hard to say whether a more participatory approach would have gained traction, given the sporadic and uneven state of left politics in the country today. It's also difficult to predict the Lewis campaign team's plans for navigating the choppy waters that lie ahead, whatever the outcome of the leadership race, and how the call to build activist hubs across the country will be received if Lewis wins. At a public meeting we recently [helped host](#), about building a relationship between the activist left and a potential Lewis-led NDP, the conversation's tenor was generally positive, suggesting Lewis and his campaign may have opened the door to a more constructive relationship between the grassroots left in Canada and the NDP. Still, we came away from that meeting with a renewed sense of the enormous work, imagination, and goodwill needed to build the mechanisms that would allow those left forces to both support and hold to account a Lewis NDP.

At the same time, it can be simplistic to assume there exists a neat dichotomy between more radical social movements and more moderate entities such as political parties. This dichotomy is well-worn: past initiatives to move the NDP to the left, such as the 2001 New Politics Initiative, assumed the renewal of the NDP necessitated bringing the party to the country's social movements – a fetishization of social movements as a reservoir of radical politics and grassroots democracy that remains strong today. In reality, "social movements" in Canada are largely composed of trade unions, student unions, environmental and other issue-based campaigns, NGOs, and other organizations that are aligned with NDP priorities and operating within the same institutional networks, with personnel whose individual career trajectories often span multiple corners of that ecosystem. This can sometimes even place these movements and their leaderships politically to the right of the NDP, especially when it is not in government. We should acknowledge that social movements, especially where organized labour is involved in them, are beset by internal contradictions, including debates over their strategic and ideological orientations.

The NDP and social movements should be seen as intersecting terrains on which different strategies compete, each presenting both challenges and opportunities. Defeating the centrist forces that operate there won't be accomplished by staying on the sidelines. The goal should instead be to coordinate an alternative left political project within and across both arenas – a coordination that would necessarily involve those who hold elected office as representatives of the NDP.

# Some provisional principles for engagement with the NDP

Left debate is full of binaries such as electoral politics versus social movements and labour bureaucracy versus rank and file, where one of the coordinates is assumed to be more radical or more authentically socialist than the other. Yet these debates too often remain abstract. The radical potential of any political force needs to be tested in the realm of real politics and struggle, not labelled in a way that decides its nature and potential in advance.

Two guiding principles could help. The first is to avoid investing any one individual or organization with the responsibility of being the standard-bearer for a left political project of transformation. No one individual or organization – not even a federal political party – would independently have the leverage to sustain such a project in the face of reactionary headwinds. Nor would any single individual or organization alone be able to resolve the profound contradictions that beset Canada as a multinational settler-colonial state. There must always be room for autonomous Indigenous and Québécois initiatives that may advocate for distinct projects of self-determination.

A second guiding principle is that we shouldn't be afraid of, and should even seek to encourage, generative tensions in our political projects. Such tensions include the need to hold left-wing office-holders to account and also buttress them with support when needed. That dynamic could help those office-holders resist the opposing forces that will inevitably seek to neutralize any left political project. More broadly, it would allow for the development of a left ecology in which the NDP, social movements, and labour work out our contradictions in the course of real struggle, with the goal of building the left's power.

Struggling to reshape the NDP would require taking over existing institutional mechanisms or creating new ones – transforming riding associations into activist hubs, for example. It could entail building or growing grassroots organizations that intervene within the NDP while remaining autonomous from it. We are agnostic about whether a Lewis-led NDP would be the main driving force in this network of intersecting initiatives, each with its own structure and activities.

Ultimately, the left in Canada must ask itself whether it can afford to wait for a better opportunity to come along to meet our moment's escalating crises. Is there capacity and will in this country to build a left-wing alternative to the NDP that can operate on the scale needed to meet those challenges in a timely manner? And can the left afford to leave the electoral field to the pollsters and strategists that have dominated the NDP for the last few decades – or worse, to the eternal, suffocating showdown between the center-right Liberals and the hard-right Conservatives?

In the short to medium term, it seems as though there is no popular basis in Canada for a mass left-wing, country-wide force entirely outside the NDP. The longstanding impasse and small-group character of organizations to the left of the NDP in this country illustrates this clearly. Engaging with the NDP through the Avi Lewis leadership campaign, in part to seed activist hubs and other fresh organizations, could be read as an attempt at a shortcut – a gamble that imperfect means can help us leap beyond the left's impasse. But we believe the gamble is worthwhile, because of how much all our struggles, movements, and organizations stand to benefit from such a leap.

## [Midnight Sun](#)

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