

Editorial

The Changing of the Guard in the Liberal Party

Following last weekend's Liberal leadership convention in Montreal, Stéphane Dion emerged as the new leader of the Liberal Party defeating front-runners Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae. His election as leader was secured through an alliance with Gerard Kennedy, who crossed the floor to the Dion camp just prior to the third ballot. Dion will now take over as leader of the Official Opposition in parliament and begin gearing up for an almost certain spring election.

Political commentators have declared that the Dion and Kennedy camps represent the forces of renewal in the Liberal Party, while the Ignatieff and

Rae campaigns represented the Chretien and Martin factions that have split the Liberal Party over the past several years. Dion campaigned on a platform of environmentalism and opposed the extension of the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan. He is, therefore, well positioned to present an "alternative" on the two issues that have drawn the most opposition to the Harper Conservative government.

The selection of Dion as Liberal leader is almost certain to exacerbate the inter-monopoly contradictions that have fuelled the political disequilibrium that has characterized the Canadian

See page 4: Liberals

Winnipeg Rally in Solidarity With the People of Gaza



Protestors gathered at the Manitoba Legislature on a chilly December 2, part of an international day of solidarity with the people of Gaza.

Israel's Six-Month Assault on Gaza

On November 26, Israel and a number of different Palestinian groups reached a truce on the ground in Gaza. The truce, which came after Israel rejected an earlier truce proposal, has brought to an end, for the time being, Israel's six-month siege on the Gaza Strip.

In June, supposedly in response to the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) re-entered the Gaza Strip where it has since carried out a series of military actions. It claims that these are aimed at stopping rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the armed wing of Fatah. However, over six months of these actions, an estimated 500 Palestinians - the vast majority civilians - have been killed with another 1,000 seriously injured. Rocket attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip have also continued, resulting in the death of 19 Israeli civilians to date.

On November 1, the IDF intensified its military campaign, targeting the Beit Hanoun area in Gaza. On November 2, at dawn, the IDF began firing artillery shells at six homes in Beit Hanoun that, according to the IDF, had been identified as bases for rocket attacks. The shelling killed 18 civilians, including seven children and six women, and wounded 53 civilians. International press coverage of the immediate aftermath of the attack made it clear that the homes targeted were family dwellings not bases used by Palestinian forces to attack Israel. Following widespread public outrage over the shelling, the IDF and Israeli government officially expressed "regret" for the incident, conceded that there were no 'militant' targets within the houses and promised to launch an investigation into what went wrong.

Any analysis of the IDF tactics in Gaza, not just in last month but since the withdrawal of Israeli settlements in August 2005, would indicate that the IDF action went exactly according to plan. The IDF policy is clearly one of collective punishment, with Palestinian civilians paying the price. The "shoot or bomb first" mentality of the IDF has been documented hundreds, if not thousands, of times. The only difference with the massacre at Beit Hanoun was that some of it was caught on camera and broadcast around the world.

Palestinian human rights groups have responded

to the IDF assaults on Gaza with justifiable outrage and have called repeatedly for international assistance. Following the November 2 massacre, a coalition of 11 human rights groups released a statement clearly outlining multiple violations of international humanitarian law committed by the IDF within the Gaza Strip. The groups called on the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and international human rights organizations to condemn this crime, investigate it fully, and take effective action to ensure the protection of the Palestinian people.

Response of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Partially in response to this call, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Canadian Louise Arbour, paid a five-day visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in mid-November. Arbour, who visited some of the surviving family members of the Beit Hanoun massacre, expressed her shock at the widespread violation of the human rights of Palestinians living under occupation. For this statement, Arbour was vilified in the North American media and tremendous pressure was brought through diplomatic channels for her to 'soften' her language. Thus, at the November 23 press conference at the end of her visit, Arbour said that both Palestinian and Israeli civilians were the "primary victims of the alarming deprivation of human rights in the region." While she noted that the situation was worst in the occupied territories, she also made a point of equating Palestinian and Israeli suffering, despite all the evidence, which suggests there is no equivalency.

"I left Gaza with a sense that the right of its people to physical integrity - their right to life - was particularly imperiled. Beit Hanoun is only one case in many," she said. Describing her visit to the West Bank, she told reporters "I was struck by the severe impact that the barrier and the system of checkpoints, road blocks, trenches and earth mounds was having on family life and economic life, indeed, on the quality of life: in short, on human dignity." Arbour also

See page 3: Gaza Assault

Gaza Assault...from page 2

stressed that she had told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas it was essential that the Palestinian Authority stop the launching of rockets into Israel and prosecute those responsible. Firing Qassam missiles into Israel, she said, “is done only with the intent to kill and to spread fear without discrimination. As such they are in breach of international humanitarian law and their use must cease immediately.”

The Israeli government responded to Arbour’s visit by pointedly highlighting her comments about rocket attacks on Israel while ignoring her sweeping condemnation of human rights violations in the occupied territories.

Responses of the U.S, Canada and the International Community

For its part, the UN General Assembly responded to the outcry against the massacre at Beit Hanoun by passing a resolution on November 17 condemning the Israeli aggression against Palestinian civilians in the occupied territories. The resolution calls for an immediate halt to Israel’s ongoing military campaign in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem. It also demands that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan set up a fact-finding mission to investigate the Israeli shelling of Beit Hanoun. The resolution, adopted by 156 votes in favour, seven against and six abstentions, came a week after the United States vetoed a Security Council draft resolution that would have strongly condemned Israel for the massacre in Beit Hanoun.

The resolution was fully endorsed by the 118-member Non-Aligned Movement, the 57-member Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the European Union and many African and Latin American nations. It was opposed by the United States, Israel, Australia, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau, while Canada, Côte d’Ivoire, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu all abstained. It is a black stain on the Canadian government that it directed Canada’s representative at the United Nations to abstain on this resolution condemning Israel’s massacre of Palestinians. It is even more reprehensible that at the same time that the General Assembly was voting on this resolution, Stephen Harper was loudly proclaiming himself as a champion of human rights at the APEC Summit by publicly criticizing the alleged

violations of human rights by Vietnam and China.

Speaking on the resolution on behalf the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the largest political bloc of developing nations in the General Assembly, Cuba’s Ambassador Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz denounced the United States for blocking the Security Council resolution on Israel. He said the NAM was forced to call the General Assembly session because the Security Council had failed to fulfill its responsibility in the maintenance of international peace and security as a result of “the abuse of veto.” The NAM demanded that Israel must immediately cease its aggression against the civilian populations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and abide by its obligations and responsibilities under the Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians in the time of war.

At the General Assembly session, Palestinian UN Observer Riyad Mansour said that since 1967 this was the thirty-first occasion that the United States had used its veto in support of Israel regarding activities in the occupied territories. “This repeated use of the veto sends the wrong message to Israel that it is above international law and that it can continue to commit crimes and acts of outright aggression with impunity,” he said, adding that it also “signals to the Palestinian people that the targeting of their civilians is acceptable and overlooked by the Security Council since the perpetrator is Israel.” Mansour reported that in the previous week more than 80 Palestinian civilians, including 22 children, had lost their lives as a result of the “ruthless” and extensive Israeli assaults in the occupied areas.

A number of UN agencies have recently strongly condemned Israeli actions against civilians in Palestinian areas. For example, a few weeks ago, John Dugard, UN special rapporteur on Palestinian human rights, said that Israel was largely to blame for turning Gaza into a “prison” and “throwing away the key.” In a statement, he also criticized Canada, Europe and the United States for cutting funds to the Palestinian Authority, following the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian election.

In addition, Dugard noted that the quartet of the United States, Russia, the EU and the UN, sponsors of the roadmap peace plan in the Middle East, had

See page 4: Gaza Assault

Liberals...from page 1

political scene since the 1993 collapse of the Progressive Conservative Party. During their brief period in office the Harper Conservatives have demonstrated that they, like the Bush Republicans in the U.S., are the representatives of the big oil monopolies and have no interest in compromising those interests with the interests of the manufacturing monopolies. By emphasizing environmental issues, Dion has signalled that he intends to challenge the agenda of the western-based oil monopolies and push the interests of the eastern-based manufacturers. During the run-up to the next federal election, both Harper and Dion will be attempting to line up the economic and political elites in Quebec behind their respective monopoly interests.

Although a lot can happen in the four to six months before the next election, at this time there is no indication that the Quebec monopolies are willing to throw in their lot with either the Alberta oil monopolies or the Ontario manufacturing monopolies. Their economic interests have been well served for several decades by playing off one monopoly group against the other; and the continuing strength of the Bloc Quebecois indicates that they intend to continue with this strategy. There is also no indication at this point of any significant drop in support for the Harper Conservatives in the West - despite their bungling of the softwood lumber dispute and relations with China - nor is there any indication of a groundswell of support for the Conservatives in Ontario or the Maritimes.

Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the Conservatives will be able to win a majority in the next election. On the other hand, if Dion succeeds in establishing himself as the pro-environment, anti-war candidate he could attract enough NDP voters to win a strong minority or even a majority government. Indeed, it was clear from the speeches of all the leadership hopefuls last weekend that this will be the main strategy of the Liberals to regain power.

It is a virtual certainty that during the next few months Canadians will be asked to ignore their own experience and trust the representatives of one group of monopoly capital to solve the problems being created by another group of monopoly capitalists. Everyone from social activists to trade unionists will urge Canadians to vote for the Liberals as the "lesser evil" and as the only alternative to the pro-Bush policies of the Harper Conservatives. Then, as they have done in the past, the Liberals will pursue virtually identical policies in the name of preserving Canadian

sovereignty, protecting the environment and bringing peace to the world. And, once again, the work being carried out by various oppositional movements will be sidelined and dismantled so that no real progress and renewal of society can take place. In the name of renewal Stephane Dion and his Liberals will do everything in their power to block renewal and maintain the status quo.

Of course, the Harper Conservatives represent a very real danger to the Canadian people, but so too do the Liberals and, for that matter, the NDP and the Bloc. While the various parties may represent different sections of monopoly capital, in the final analysis they all represent monopoly capitalism and that is the real source of the danger to the working class and people. Only by rejecting this "good cop - bad cop" routine of the bourgeoisie and taking up the work of building genuine alternatives will the working class and people be able to make any real progress towards renewing Canadian society.

Gaza Assault...from page 3

done little to stop Israel's attacks, which he described as a "brutal collective punishment" of the Palestinian people. "I hope that my portrayal... will trouble the consciences of those accustomed to turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the suffering of the Palestinian people," he told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Recently, the 47-member Council strongly condemned Israel for violating human rights and international humanitarian law by targeting civilians during its military operations.

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