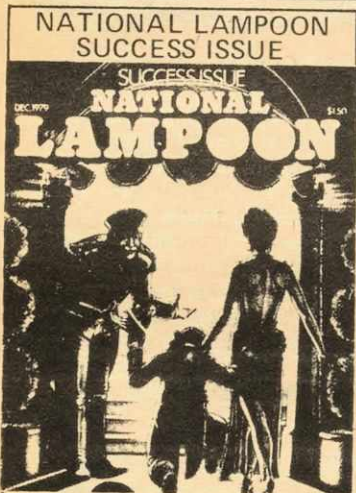


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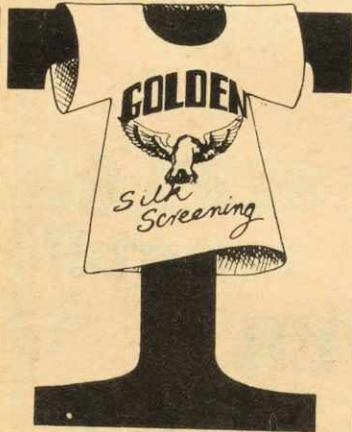
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# Left is 'called to arms'

by Bill Tieleman  
for Canadian University Press

Like an unexpected—and unwanted—guest at a formal dinner party, the left wing of the NDP made a surprise appearance at the social democrats' national convention, much to the disdain of the NDP leadership.

The formation at the convention of a strong and articulate left group within a party rapidly targeting itself for the political centre of the electorate seemed to parallel Mark Twain's famous line that the reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated. And for the party establishment, which believed it had resolved internal political differences when the notorious Waffle wing was finally buried five years ago, the creation of the left caucus, as it came to be known, had an effect akin to that of seeing a ghost.

But if the leadership was surprised that a call to arms by the left would be directly answered by more than 10 per cent of the convention delegates, the left caucus itself was clearly astonished. With the NDP closing in on a Liberal party increasingly seen by the public as leaderless, lacking policy and powerless outside Quebec, the left caucus members expected delegates to tow the establishment line and quickly adopt positions that would allow the NDP to pick up the disenchanted Liberal voters necessary for it to come in from the political cold.

Instead, 150 of the 1,200 delegates met the night before the Toronto convention began to discuss how they could force debate on a resolution which stated that the New Democratic Party should begin developing plans for an "industrial strategy in which public ownership is the major tool to control the economy for the people". Left caucus organizers had been unsure of the response such a meeting would get, booking a room that could hold a maximum of 50. But by the time the convention got underway they were forced to hold meetings in a corner of the massive Sheraton Centre ballroom to accommodate all those interested in attending.

Debate later shifted to other topics such as uranium mining, Quebec's right to self-determination and the jailing of Jean Claude Parrot, president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) when delegates saw that they had a genuine grassroots strength and the ability to influence the convention without the disruption that marked the Waffle's era. And the left caucus also found that it was not infested by what Waffle leader Mel Watkins called "the parasitical Trotskyist sects which gutted the Waffle from within on their way into the wilderness."

Still, the left caucus wisely kept a low profile to avoid providing a target for the party establishment to aim at. Where the Waffle set up an alternate structure within the



party and attempted, with Jim Laxer's candidacy in the 1971 federal leadership campaign, to grasp the levers of NDP power, the left caucus remained loosely organized throughout the convention and declined to directly run candidates for any party positions.

"It's not that we're trying to take over the party leadership. We're trying to move the party in a direction," explained Jim Turk, one of the left caucus leaders, a former Ontario NDP president, and an NDP federal council member.

The fact that the direction was to the left while voters seem to be moving to the right was enough to prod the party establishment to attempt to restrict the left caucus, but without any unseemly confrontation if front of the nation's press. The battle over supporting CUPW became a perfect example of the internal differences.

With Jean Claude Parrot going to jail the day the convention began for his part in the 1978 postal strike that was broken by government legislation, many NDP faithful assumed that one of the five resolutions under consideration calling for support for Parrot and CUPW would reach the floor for a vote.

But passing such a motion would have meant a serious rebuke to party leader Ed Broadbent, who was less than enthusiastic about supporting CUPW during the strike or afterwards, and especially to Canadian Labour Congress

(CLC) head Dennis McDermott, who has openly attacked Parrot and CUPW for their actions. It was McDermott's antagonism to CUPW that prompted delegates to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) convention in October to call for his resignation (although McDermott incredibly suggested that the tiny Marxist-Leninist group In Struggle was responsible for the motion through their manipulation of CUPE delegates) and no one in the party establishment was eager to see the CLC boss embarrassed again when he was responsible for big labour's pledge of support to the NDP.

**"It's not that we're trying to take over the party leadership. We're trying to move the party in a direction."**

The establishment machinery went into motion and the resolutions committee, which determines which handful of the hundreds of resolutions introduced to the convention by riding associations and union locals actually reaches the floor for debate, put the CUPW resolutions low on the priority list, where it was believed they would remain undisturbed for the duration of the convention.

Instead the left caucus geared up for the challenge and skillfully plotted a strategy that brought the CUPW question out of limbo. As

delegates came in Saturday after lunch, session chairman Grant Notley, the Alberta NDP leader and lone social democratic MLA in the province, tried to get things underway.

But the first person at the floor microphone was John Rodriguez, the Nickel Belt MP and party labour critic, who disrupted the proceedings by announcing that he was introducing an emergency motion dealing with the jailing of Parrot. Rodriguez, the most prominent of the federal MPs active in the left caucus, was quickly ruled out of order by Notley as tension began to build among the delegates. Notley's ruling was quickly challenged by the left caucus' Jim Turk, stationed first in line at another microphone. Notley was overruled by the delegates after Turk's emotional call for the party to rally behind Parrot and CUPW. Rodriguez was then allowed to speak to his motion, calling the jailing of Parrot an attack by the government on public service unions to the strong applause of delegates. At the next mike was Ed Ziemba, the Ontario NDP MP who was arrested recently on a United Steelworkers of America picket line at the Barrie, Ontario Radio Shack plant. Finally, CUPE secretary-treasurer Kealey Cummings spoke, telling delegates there is one type of justice for RCMP officers and cabinet ministers who break the law and another for trade unionists.

When the vote came, a scant 10 minutes after Rodriguez had started the action, not a single delegate opposed the resolution, which said that jailing Parrot "boils down to the punishing of a union leader for acting in a legitimate and responsible manner in defending the interests and welfare of the members of his union".

The suddenness and ease with which the left caucus pushed through the resolution startled the NDP leadership and gave them cause to re-evaluate the left's strength. Later in the day, when the left caucus tried to remove from a resolution on Quebec's right

to self-determination a statement urging Quebecers to remain within confederation, Broadbent was forced to speak against the move in order to guarantee its defeat. And to make sure delegates didn't miss the point of Broadbent's remarks, party officials ensured that the leader's microphone was turned up to the maximum level and the speaking time rule ignored by the chair.

An attempt by the left caucus to have a resolution calling for a moratorium on new nuclear power plants

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