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Statement from Paul Moist, national president of CUPE, on upcoming NDP leadership campaign

The outpouring of grief at the sad passing of NDP Leader Jack Layton having subsided somewhat, political pundits, media commentators and potential NDP leadership candidates have hit the airwaves as the party begins the process of choosing our next leader.

The expected range of views on who will run and who might win has been cast within the context of the NDP's historic relationship with organized labour. The debate has come from some truly questionable quarters, borders on the absurd and it is the clearest example of a red herring thrown into the public discourse that we have witnessed in some time.

Two leading candidates, both honourable gentlemen, albeit each with vested interests, have squared off over the issue of union weighted voting in NDP leadership contests. One refers to labour as no different than environmental groups. The other in an obvious move to court union support, has said the weighted system must be maintained.

Certain media commentators cast this question in the frame not so much on the matter of weighted voting, but on whether a modern NDP can afford the relationship with labour period, given the success in the May 2 election, and the need for the party to "modernize" in an effort to move towards being a governing option in the eye's of the average Canadian. This, I suspect, was the real point in raising this issue. Because, for some who have entered this debate it has nothing to do with voting systems and everything to do with playing the "union bogeyman" card that is so prevalent in many circles and on many subjects these days.

But, the pundits, the editorial writers and indeed the candidates-in-waiting are all, quite simply put, wrong. There is no issue over this question. There is no weighted union voting for NDP leadership campaigns and it will not be debated by the NDP's federal council when it meets tomorrow.

Such a system did exist in 2003, based on labour's traditional role in delegated conventions. In 2006, at the Quebec City convention, the constitution was amended to ensure that organized labour's role in the Party was maintained in its structures and in its membership, and to ensure that the one member – one vote principle applies to the process for electing our leader. The above facts have been lost over the course of the past week. The non-story ought to be over but for the reasons mentioned above, I suspect it won't be.

Canadian Labour is not a constituent group within the NDP. We were and are a founding partner, one that forged the NDP out of its predecessor the Cooperative Commonwealth

Federation. Thus, the reality of organized labour within the NDP is deep and meaningful. The relationship between the party and labour is not only about the past, it's about the future. At its core, it is about a shared vision on fundamental issues such as universal health care, public education and a commitment to local, national and international peace and social justice.

The other incredibly important shared value includes the NDP's support for not only workers rights to organize into free trade unions. The NDP believes it is the right choice for workers to make in order to create a measure of democracy in the workplace along with the economic security that goes with unionization.

Changes in federal and various provincial laws regarding funding for political parties and election spending have done away with both labour and corporate donations. They represent shift in public policy that I whole heartedly support. The changes we made to the party's constitution in 2006 came about in part as a result of federal legislated changes to party funding, but more importantly, they were aimed at strengthening the party and building membership support among the trade union affiliates. We are all better off when limitations on party donations is coupled with fair public financing for those political parties that achieve threshold levels of electoral support. Along with countless other trade unionists, I supported this in 2006 and I support it today.

Given this certain reality of the NDP's core values and its membership make-up, does it make any sense to consider a merger with the federal Liberals? This question too, has been forced in the early days of NDP leadership 2012. On the heels of our election to official Opposition, some ask, is it time to re-shape federal politics with one party of the right and one progressive party on the left? One of the great strengths of the NDP, the party I have belonged to my entire adult life, is the free exchange of ideas and divergent views. But, on this question it would be in my view a fatal mistake to pursue such a merger. Neither party split from the other, they are very different entities with very different values. The Conservative Party of Canada represents the reunification of the political-right which broke apart in the late 1980's, a completely different scenario than the NDP – Liberal history.

The Federal NDP has much work to do. We must encourage an open and transparent debate about the ideas and vision for the future offered by the candidates who will emerge. We need to sell memberships to encourage a vibrant leadership race, but more importantly to add to the army of men and women who regularly knock on doors and work to elect NDP candidates who reflect their values. And, we need to get behind whoever is elected.

If as New Democrats we allow potential candidates to square off over non-issues involving labour within the NDP we do a disservice to the party many of us cherish. And, if we take what some view as an expedient but ill-conceived path to power through merging with Liberals, Canadians will see such a crass move for what it is and it will move us further away from power.

My friend and former Leader Jack Layton spoke often to me about continuing the "project" as he put it. One member at a time, one voter at a time. Like many other New Democrats, I am committed to the "project" for the long haul. The path will be unquestionably difficult, but adhering to the principles that brought us this far seems to me the best path.

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