

## **The NDP Leadership Race: A Labour Party Leader From....Labour?**

Canada's left party may be undertaking the bold experiment of indulging in overt, unapologetic class politics. Risks include energizing members and winning.

DAVID MOSCROP

OCT 02, 2025

Probably a good safety measure for Question Period. Photo by [Ümit Yıldırım](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Have we got a live one here? Rob Ashton, president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada, is running to lead the New Democratic Party of Canada. I confess to having undervalued his candidacy before he announced his campaign. Taken in by the chatter of party people and semi-official lines, I expected the contest to be a two-way race between Heather McPherson, a member of Parliament from Edmonton, and Avi Lewis, a journalist, activist, and legacy candidate whose father ran the Ontario party and whose grandfather led the federal one. That isn't to say I didn't expect there to be other candidates. Rather, I expected that McPherson and Lewis would stand out from pillar to post in a rather short race, ending in March, with a \$100,000 entry fee —designed, we are assured, to set a reasonable bar for serious contenders, not merely to keep out the kooks. I might be wrong about that. I hope so.

Ashton is running as a general in the class war. Indeed, he's not shy about using the words "class war." His campaign looks to be premised on the critique that the party becoming is disconnected from unions and working-class Canadians, and the hope that it rebuild that link. [Writing for CBC](#), journalist David Thurton captured the spirit of Ashton's campaign in a series of quotations reminiscent of an NDP of past generations, and perhaps one that could be fitted to this moment.

As Thurton reports, Ashton says he's running on account of being "sick and tired of watching working people get screwed." Listening to Ashton, past and present, you get the sense he's not set to be a politician stripped of veneer, but one who was never coated in it to begin with.

“I talk like I talk at work. I’m not gonna bullshit you,” he told CBC. He speaks of eating the rich.

### Subscribe

At the ever-present risk of being mistaken again, the candidates who’ve announced their intention to seek the NDP leadership reflect varied labour archetypes: Lewis will appeal to urbanite progressives of the sort we call, derisively or otherwise, champagne socialists, along with the campus activist crowd that shows up to every barn-burner pub night. McPherson is a left-centrist and may have more than her fair share of establishment support, though perhaps not all of caucus. Her candidacy, shaped by Alberta politics, shows a mainstream caution, hedging, for instance, on natural resource and climate policy. Montreal activist Yves Engler, who has declared his run but hasn’t yet registered, is an unapologetic radical with one setting: *frappé*.

Ashton is a blue-collar labourer. “I’m a working-class Canadian who knows what it’s like to punch in, sweat it out and struggle to make sure our kids have it better than you did,” he said as he launched his campaign. That line will resonate with many, and many of the people the New Democrats need to reach. My late father, a mechanic who often asked me for voting advice but, as far as I can tell, never voted NDP, would have voted for Ashton, I think. He didn’t pay much attention to politics, but he voted every few years. He felt like he was getting a raw deal.

Well, you might say, that’s just one vote, and not even one, since, well, see the adjective above. But as the Liberals govern with a technocrat banker at the helm and the Conservative Party makes a play for working-class Canadians, a combined policy program and aesthetic appeal rooted in speaking to, for, and with workers is invaluable. If every worker who felt that they were getting screwed by *the system* felt at home in the NDP, there would be a run on orange ink for lawn signs.

The pollster Allan Gregg once said to me that voters ask themselves of candidates two questions: Are they for me, and are they like me? While the NDP leadership race may be short, there are still months ahead for party members and the country to get to know the candidates, and to ask those questions. I hope observers won’t make the same mistake I did, discounting the possibility of a competitive race beyond the two headline candidates. I equally implore those observers to take a close look at Ashton, because you may find he’s not only for you, but like you.