

Canadian Auto Workers union to stump for Liberals in next Ontario election

A reporter

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The Canadian Auto Workers union has decided, in effect, to stump for the election of the big business Liberal Party in the next Ontario election, which is likely to be held in the spring of 1999.

Earlier this month, the union's Canada Council voted by a majority of about two-thirds to endorse CAW president Buzz Hargrove's call for 'strategic voting' to defeat the current Tory government--i.e. to support Liberal candidates wherever the nominees of the trade union-based New Democratic Party have little chance of defeating the Tory candidate. Although the 'strategic voting' resolution did not specifically call for the election of a Liberal government, the province's parliamentary arithmetic and the NDP's current low-level of popular support make it all but inevitable that the CAW will be supporting the Liberals in a majority of Ontario's 103 parliamentary constituencies.

The CAW resolution commits the union to 'defeating as many Harris Tories as possible ... with the knowledge that this may bolster the Liberal campaign,' and 'not resourcing NDP campaigns without a chance.' In speaking before the CAW's leading body, Hargrove was less circumspect. He sought to bolster Ontario Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty, proclaiming him as 'at least ... not anti-labour.'

The Ontario Federation of Labour and other individual unions have not publicly responded to the CAW decision. But they are expected to follow suit, although many may forego formalizing their position in a policy resolution.

The CAW bureaucracy has long wielded great power within trade union and social democratic circles, especially in Ontario, where auto manufacturing is far and away the most important industry. It was Bob White, the then president of the CAW and current Canadian Labour Congress president, who in 1985

brokered an accord between the Liberals and the NDP under which the social democrats agreed to support a minority Liberal government in Ontario, in exchange for a Liberal pledge to introduce a package of modest legislative reforms.

The CAW's current position differs from its 1985 stance in two important respects: First, the CAW bureaucracy is not waiting until the elections are over to ally with the Liberals; second, it is asking nothing of the Liberals in return for its support.

Indeed, in arguing in favor of strategic voting, Hargrove conceded that the federal Liberal government of Jean Chretien has carried out massive cuts in social spending. But he observed that the NDP, which held power in Ontario between 1990 and 1995, also imposed right-wing big business policies, including massive wage and job cuts on public sector workers.

The NDP has more or less welcomed the CAW decision. Bob Rae, the former Ontario premier and NDP leader, has repeatedly used his *Globe and Mail* column to call for a Liberal-NDP alliance. The current ONDP leader, Howard Hampton, termed the CAW policy 'good news' for his party. 'This isn't about votes. This is about strategic allocation of resources, so that you can run the kind of strong campaign with lots of energy and lots of good resources.'

It is highly likely that the NDP leadership and union bureaucracy have struck a deal under which the NDP will tacitly accept the unions allying with the Liberals in the majority of Ontario constituencies, in exchange for the unions throwing their full resources behind the NDP in 20 or 30 ridings. This is because the NDP top brass fears that the party may not be able to win the 12 seats needed to retain official party status in the Ontario Legislature. Since falling from power in June 1995, the NDP has continued to lose popular support and would,

according to current opinion polls, win just 13 percent of the vote were an Ontario election held today.

The continuing erosion in NDP support is certainly not due to any turn to the right on the part of working people. Ontario has been convulsed by militant strikes and protests during much of the past three and half years, as working people have sought to resist the Harris Tory government's drive to pauperize the jobless, slash social and public services and restrict trade union rights.

For a time, the union bureaucrats, especially Hargrove, sought to place themselves at the head of the anti-Tory movement, the better to restrict it to demonstrations, protest walkouts and trade union contract struggles. Central to these efforts was the demonization of Tory Premier Mike Harris. A small town businessman and former golf pro, Harris has been depicted by the union bureaucrats as the fount of the anti-working class offensive, the better to obscure the fact that the agenda he has pursued is, in its essentials, that of the entire political establishment, from the Tories and the Reform Party to the NDP.

The union bureaucracy's attitude to the anti-Tory protests changed dramatically, however, following the November 1997, province-wide teachers' strike. The teachers' action evoked massive public support and threatened to unleash a working class political offensive against the Tories. Having torpedoed the strike, the union bureaucrats moved to wind up the anti-Tory protests, proclaiming that they now intended to concentrate on defeating Harris at the polls in the coming election.

That Hargrove has now taken the lead in transforming the bureaucracy's anti-Harris protest campaign into an explicit call for working people to support the Liberals is especially significant. The International Socialists and other pseudo-socialist groups have repeatedly praised the CAW president as a 'left' and urged workers and youth to make pressuring him and other 'left' bureaucrats the focus of their political activity.

If the union bureaucrats are so visceral in their opposition to Harris it is because he has reduced their influence, by discarding many of the corporatist arrangements set up by his Liberal and NDP predecessors. But they have worked, and in the event the Tories are reelected, will continue to work with Harris for they share the same fundamental

objective--supporting Canadian big business in the struggle for markets and profits. In fact, the very week Hargrove won approval from the CAW's Canada Council for his policy of strategic voting to defeat the Tories, he, Harris and federal Industry Minister John Manley flew to Seattle to convince Boeing it would be in its best interests to cut US, rather than Canadian, workers' jobs.

See Also:

Unions derail Ontario teachers' struggle
[17 September 1998]

Ontario unions bury protest campaign against Harris government
[31 July 1998]

The betrayal of the Ontario teachers' strike:
The lessons for all workers
[17 November 1997]



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