

Mike Harris and the Toronto Star on union "power" and union "bosses"

A comment on the Ontario election campaign

Keith Jones
2 June 1999

Tory Premier Mike Harris has repeatedly railed against the “union bosses” during the campaign for Ontario's June 3 election. By pledging to “stand up to the union bosses,” Harris has sought to solidify his big business support and mobilize the Tories' petty-bourgeois party activists, who identify the unions with Welfare State policies, other limits on the “magic” of the market, and the despised notion of social equality.

In the second week of the campaign, Harris and Ontario Treasurer Ernie Eaves went so far as to charge that Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty had “cut a secret deal” with the unions. Questioned by reporters as to the terms of the deal, the Tory leader smartly replied that he didn't know because it is “secret”!

“If you look at Dalton McGuinty, going to the union leaders, courting their money, courting their support, I would say he's cut a deal,” Harris told a London, Ontario audience May 11. “But it's up to Ontarians to decide. Do they want union leaders to run the province. Or do they want duly elected representatives to make the decisions on behalf of all the people? That's in part what this election is all about.”

The following day, speaking at the Empire Club, an organization as associated with Ontario's traditional elite as its name would suggest, Harris boasted his government has stood up to the unions and other “special interest” groups. “If you ... don't do what you know is right, these folks will push any premier and any government on every decision.”

Harris's charges of a “secret deal” between the union officialdom and the Liberals are absurd, and have been treated as such even by the media.

A number of unions that have traditionally supported the social-democratic New Democratic Party, like the Canadian Auto Workers, and others, like the Ontario Nurses Association, that in the past have stood aloof from electoral politics, are urging a vote for the Liberals in ridings where the Liberal candidate has the best chance of defeating the Tory nominee. But for this, they have been rewarded by the

most right-wing Liberal campaign since Liberal Premier Mitchell Hepburn won reelection in 1937 on a pledge to keep the CIO movement for industrial unionism out of Canada. Throughout the campaign, McGuinty has been at pains to demonstrate his support for the fundamentals of the Tories' Common Sense Revolution, including the 21 percent cut in welfare rates and workfare, the repeal of the NDP's “anti-scab” law, tax cuts that disproportionately reward the well-to-do, and legislation outlawing future provincial budget deficits and making all future tax increases contingent on binding referenda. Indeed, McGuinty has repeatedly attacked the Tories from the right, charging they are fiscally “irresponsible” because they have cut taxes before balancing the budget. According to right-wing, *National Post* columnist Andrew Coyne, the Liberals have spent the campaign “in Tory drag,” “literally signing on to one Tory policy after another.”

Himself vying for big business's blessing, McGuinty could not respond to Harris's charges that the Liberals are beholden to the unions with even the patently obvious observation that the Tory election war chest has been filled to overflowing with contributions from Canada's corporate elite.

Harris is right in one respect—the place of the unions, and more especially the union bureaucracy, in Ontario's political life has emerged as a major issue dividing the Tories from the NDP and the Liberals.

In their four years in office, the Tories have introduced a spate of reactionary changes to the province's labor laws. These changes have included: lifting the prohibitions on the use of strikebreakers; stripping the Ontario Labor Relations Board of the right to automatically grant union certification in cases where the employer sought to intimidate workers from joining a union; abolishing union “successor” rights for Ontario government workers whose jobs are privatized; outlawing the unionization of workfare participants; abolishing the long-standing practice of resorting to professional mediators jointly nominated by union and

management; and forcing arbitrators in contracts covering those public sector workers who are legally prohibited from striking to follow government-imposed financial guidelines. The Tories have also abolished or greatly reduced the importance of a number of institutionalized forums of government, union and business collaboration, including scrapping the Premiers' Council, an advisory board on which top union officials sat.

These changes have had a double purpose: to erode workers' capacity to improve and defend their terms of employment; and to reduce the political power of the labor bureaucracy so as to make it more amenable to the demands of big business.

In their current election platform, *Blueprint*, the Tories are proposing a series of further reactionary amendments to the labor code, including making it easier to decertify unions and allowing employers to more actively oppose unionization drives. To pique the union bureaucracy, they also are threatening to legally compel unions to publish the salaries of their top officers.

The Tories are seeking to systematically deprive workers of any means of resisting the dictates of capital. But this does not imply the outright scrapping of the collective bargaining system, which big business, if not necessarily all Tory activists, recognizes serves to deflect and contain worker unrest; nor does it mean the rejection of all collaboration with the union bureaucracy. Last December, Harris joined Buzz Hargrove, the president of the CAW and architect of the unions' campaign in support of the Liberals, in flying to Seattle to meet with Boeing's top executive so as to plead with them to cut US rather than Canadian workers' jobs. Biding the advice of the *Globe and Mail* the Tories, the traditional voice of Bay Street, in the fall of 1997 backtracked on plans to suspend collective bargaining rights for hundreds of thousands of public sector workers who were being affected by the restructuring of government operations (Bill 136), and choose instead to accept the unions' offer of a bargaining structure that accepted the main premises of the Tory restructuring.

For its part, the union bureaucracy has resisted, but ultimately reconciled itself to the Tory "hard line." As mass opposition swelled to the Tory government's social spending cuts, the then Ontario Federation of Labour President Gord Wilson ruled out a challenge to the Tory government's "right to govern." Then, after a mass, overtly political strike of 120,000 teachers had threatened to ignite a mass movement against the Tories, the OFL wound up its campaign of anti-Tory protests altogether.

In his recently published autobiography, Hargrove argues against Harris from the standpoint that his weakening of the union apparatus will ultimately prove harmful to big

business. "Unions," writes Hargrove, "probably prevent more strikes than they precipitate. 3 out of every 4 workers says they don't trust their employer.... Good unions work to defuse that anger.... Unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of workers' resistance (low productivity, absenteeism.) If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that labour leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes."

The *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation and most pro-Liberal newspaper, has repeatedly denounced Harris and his Tories for baiting the "union bosses." In an editorial entitled "Harris plants seeds of divisive campaign," The *Star* declared, "The problem with all this is labour's impotence. The Harris government hasn't had a problem passing one piece of its anti-union agenda in 3 ½ years....

"The unions didn't affect a single comma of the bill stripping school boards of power....

"They couldn't save a nurses' job from Harris knife. A single hospital bed....

"Just as big a problem, in marketing this enemy, is that even under Bob Rae's NDP, the most pro-labour in Ontario's history, union influence was pyrrhic. They could not even make the sanctity of contract prevail."

What the *Star* cannot say is that it is the union bureaucracy, along with the social-democratic NDP, that has played the chief role in neutering the mass opposition to the Tory agenda. The *Star* and other sections of big business are concerned Harris "divisive" tactics are needlessly polarizing the province along class lines and weakening a union leadership that has played the pivotal role in keeping the working class in check.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact