A lament for the "good old days"

The autobiography of Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove

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Labour of Love: A Fight to Create a More Humane Canada , *by Buzz Hargrove. MacFarlane, Stewart and Ross, 1998, 247 pages*

Basil "Buzz" Hargrove is routinely touted by friend and foe alike as the leading representative of the left wing of Canada's trade union movement. The union of which he is president, the Canadian Auto Workers, has traditionally been among the strongest supporters of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and has prided itself on representing a social activist tradition purportedly radically different from the business unionism of the construction trades.

Hargrove's autobiography is simultaneously a shallow attempt to refurbish his left credentials and a plea to his big business critics to recognize that unions play a valuable role in assuring corporate profitability. It is valuable only insofar as it reveals the narrow and backward outlook not only of Hargrove, but of the trade union bureaucracy as a whole.

Hargrove could have easily subtitled his book “A Lament for the Good Old Days.” His book first denounces the current policies of budget cutting and corporate restructuring and then takes aim at resurrecting the tired national reformist nostrums of Keynesian deficit spending, interest rate reduction, protectionism, etc., that formed the core of social democratic politics in a bygone era. Hargrove simply chooses to ignore the powerful impact of capitalist globalization on class relations and world economy that have rendered such policies inviable.

There was a time, Hargrove relates in his account of his rise through the bureaucracy of the United Auto Workers/Canadian Auto Workers union, when workers could simply up and quit a factory job—perhaps because of better opportunities elsewhere, perhaps just because they didn't like the look of their foreman—and walk across the street, sit for an interview and quickly gain well paid employment in another factory. Indeed, such was the flurry of hiring and economic growth in Ontario, particularly in the wake of the implementation of the 1965 Canada-US Auto Pact, that new hire Hargrove found himself at the top of his Windsor Chrysler plant's seniority list after only a few weeks on the job.

In his book, Hargrove nostalgically recalls working in the trenches of Canada's auto industry—a far cry from his childhood experiences growing up dirt poor in backwoods New Brunswick. No doubt this childhood connection to personal deprivation, as well as teen years spent working in grueling nonunion jobs in Alberta, made Hargrove immediately sympathetic to the militant trade unionism that he encountered on the shop floor and in the UAW Local 444 committees of the time.

In those days, says Hargrove proudly, the union won just as many struggles as it lost. There were regular wage increases and there was money for mortgages and cars and days at the racetrack. It seemed to Hargrove and many others at the time that capitalism, if adequately pressured, could provide an ever expanding living standard—at least for those in unions willing to fight. If only that period could have continued, Hargrove almost palpably sighs.

It didn't, of course. Those halcyon days (for some) of full employment, shop floor offensives and economic boom gave way to stagflation, wage controls, then recession and a world of chronic unemployment and ever growing social inequality. Along about the time that Hargrove was plucked in 1972 from his plant chairman position at UAW Local 444 and placed on the staff of the international union's Canadian section in Toronto, things were spiraling downward. Something was happening. But Hargrove, for the life of him, can't figure out what.

Thanks no doubt to the research department at CAW headquarters, Hargrove is adept at outlining at least the surface symptoms of the economic crisis in Canada. (It is important to note here that, in keeping with his nationalist orientation, Hargrove invariably presents his figures as if Canada existed in a vacuum jar hermetically sealed from the rest of the world.) He writes: "Between 1946 and 1971, real per capita income in Canada more than doubled. In the twenty-five years since—and in spite of the acceleration of technology, corporate restructuring and longer working hours—real per capita income has edged up only a fraction of a percent each year. Between 1986 and 1996, the real median income for Canadians actually fell."

His only explanation for this: "The roots of our national malady go deep into the venality and incompetence of successive Liberal and Conservative governments. It was these politicians—Mulroney, Michael Wilson, Chretien, Paul Martin—who ate up the notions supplied to them by right wing think tanks whose unproven theories about economics and society, and whose fetish for holding inflation down, threw our economy into reverse and passed the burden onto the backs of working Canadians."

According to Hargrove, things were moving along splendidly in the immediate postwar period. There was no “corporate agenda.” Workers never had it so good, thanks in large part to understanding Liberal and Conservative regimes that knew how to lead. Then came along politicians who listened to the wrong advice—and well, the rest is history. Never mind about the advances in microchip technology creating the conditions for sea changes in transnational production processes, the concomitant astronomical growth and development of global capital markets, the utter failure of nationally-based workers organizations to respond to these international developments and the impact that all of this has had on the fundamental organization of capitalism itself. Of this, there is hardly a word.

In reading Hargrove's book one is constantly wondering whether the author could be as spectacularly superficial as the text would lead one to believe. After all, how can one effectively deal with major historical questions such as the collapse of the postwar boom, the utter abandonment of traditional reformist programs by social democratic political parties, the

contemporary paralysis of the labour movement in the face of a wholesale onslaught on workers living standards and democratic rights without acknowledging, let alone analyzing, the rapid development of capitalist globalization? Indeed, Hargrove's efforts resemble nothing as much as those of a hapless paleontologist attempting to explain the origin of the strange bones he is digging up whilst refusing to recognize any of the tenets of evolutionary theory.

Hargrove's ideal view of the relationship between labour and capital is that unions are an integral part of guaranteeing class peace both on the shop floor and in the society at large. Indeed, in reading his account of major confrontations with employers and/or government (Canadian Airlines, PC World, Tory anti-union legislation), Hargrove reserves his highest indignation for those corporate and political opponents who arrogantly refuse to acknowledge this role. “Unions,” he says, “probably prevent more strikes than they precipitate. Three out of every four workers say they don't trust their employer. Good unions work to diffuse 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." Just look at the Big Three auto companies, asserts Hargrove, those huge profits show that unions provide a valuable service to the corporations.

One of the most revealing sections of the book was Hargrove's description of the 1984 split between the United Auto Workers International Union and its Canadian section. By the time of the split Hargrove had steadily improved his position within the union bureaucracy and was a chief lieutenant to UAW Canadian Region head Bob White.

Hargrove presents the rupture as a confrontation between the pro-company orientation of the UAW Solidarity House leadership in Detroit and the "hard-nosed," no concessions views of the Canadian leadership. But this explanation is disingenuous. The newly independent union would begin negotiating its own concessions contracts in Windsor and St. Therese, Quebec shortly after its official founding. And the decision to abandon the fight against concessions within the UAW and split the unity of North American autoworkers opened the way not just for a whole wave of further concessions in the US, but also enabled the Big Three auto companies to increasingly pit Canadian and American workers against each other in a series of "whipsaw" threats to close plants and cut wages.

In fact, the horrendous give-backs engineered by UAW President Owen Bieber in the years immediately prior to the 1984-85 split were avoided by the Canadian leadership, not out of any genuine resolve to fight concessions at all costs, but largely because of the existence of an $8-per-hour advantage in labour costs due to the lower value of the Canadian dollar, the existence of a publicly funded national healthcare system in Canada and other factors. Moreover, Canadian workers were more resistant to wage concessions than their brothers and sisters in the US, because their paycheques were being eroded far more quickly by skyrocketing inflation and interest rates.

The Canadian officials within the UAW bureaucracy simply demanded that these facts be recognized when contract negotiations occurred. When Bieber refused to grant this negotiating autonomy, threatened to revoke strike pay and leaked information advantageous to General Motors in the midst of a strike north of the border, White led the Canadian section out of the international union.

Hargrove's discussion of the split reveals an interesting and telling aspect of the whole dispute. According to Hargrove, the CAW leadership's view on the crisis in the North American auto industry in the 1980s was informed by the opinion that concessions only delayed the Big Three from taking the "tough decisions" on corporate restructuring that were necessary. For Hargrove and White before him, the CAW's position, unlike Bieber's, would encourage the Big Three to take the "tough decisions," i.e., to lobby for trade war against Japan, lay off workers and close plants. Of course, for their own part, the Big Three pushed both the concessions and rationalization aspects of their business plan whenever possible.

Perhaps nowhere in Hargrove's book is the utter bankruptcy of the trade union/social democratic perspective more strikingly revealed than in his explanation of how the Ontario New Democratic Party government of Bob Rae, which held power from 1990 to 1995, became the spearhead of Canadian big business's assault on public services. Hargrove attempts to escape his own responsibility for supporting a party that launched huge attacks on the working class and opened the door to the reactionary Conservative regime of Premier Mike Harris. But his claim that “nobody could have foreseen” what the NDP would do serves only to highlight his own untenable perspective.

Hargrove admits he was "ecstatic" in September 1990 with the ONDP election victory. "At last, the long halls of power at Queen's Park would be open to working people," he says. It was Hargrove and his predecessor Bob White who, years before, had encouraged a young Bob Rae to leave federal politics and run for the leadership of the Ontario NDP.

But Rae "bought into" the neo-conservative agenda, Hargrove says. Was this due to the collapse of the manoeuvring space previously enjoyed by reformist governments during the postwar boom period? No. To admit that would be to undermine the labour bureaucracy's deception that the NDP serves the interests of working people, not the capitalist class. Instead, the only explanation Hargrove suggests is that Rae became the unsuspecting victim of those nefarious right-wing think tanks. But Hargrove concludes, "Leaving the party is not an alternative.” He praises the pro-big business NDP government of Glen Clark in British Columbia as "proof" that social democracy can still deliver the goods.

Hargrove concludes his book with a plea for a return to the politics of class compromise and the welfare state. As the centrepiece for his prescriptions, he demands that the Bank of Canada reduce interest rates to spur investment. He rails against the effects of the North American Free Trade Pact on workers' living standards. He is, however, noticeably reluctant to resurrect earlier campaigns to "tear up" such agreements as the jobs of Canadian workers, including his own membership, become increasingly dependent on the reorganization of North American capitalism undertaken by the free trade provisions.

Hargrove's book has been distributed to every shop steward and union official within the CAW. Those workers who are honestly seeking solutions to the crisis of perspective that faces the labour movement today will not find any answers from Buzz Hargrove. Rather, they will see the pathetic display of a weakened and increasingly bewildered trade union bureaucrat fighting to keep the working class tied to the sinking ship of national reformism in a world that has long passed him by.