

# Canada: What lies behind the split in the union officialdom?

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Canada's official labor movement has been riven by a bitter jurisdictional dispute for well over a year. Since last July, the 2.3 million-member Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has enforced "full sanctions" against the Canadian Autoworkers union (CAW), because it has defied an "impartial umpire's" ruling that it cease and desist in its efforts to recruit dissident locals from another CLC affiliate, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The "full sanctions" effectively suspend the CAW, the country's largest industrial union, from CLC membership. Indeed, the CAW charges that it has been expelled from the CLC and has threatened to found a rival labor federation.

CAW representatives have been removed from all executive bodies of the CLC, the provincial federations of labor and district labor councils and CAW members are barred from participating in virtually all activities organized by the CLC and its allied organizations. The CAW has responded by withholding over \$1 million in dues to the CLC, withdrawing other funding for CLC activities, and slashing its contributions to the CLC-supported New Democratic Party.

Jurisdictional turf wars between rival union apparatuses are not uncommon. (According to the CAW, in the 1992-2000 period there were 72 jurisdictional disputes among CLC affiliates and in 20 cases member unions were found guilty of violating the CLC constitution.) What separates this dispute from previous ones is its bitterness and the apparent intransigence of both sides.

With more than 240,000 members, the CAW represents more than a tenth of the total CLC membership. But even this figure understates the stakes in the current dispute. The CAW has long been the country's most politically influential union and traditionally has wielded great influence in the CLC. Two of the four most recent CLC Presidents were former presidents of the CAW or its predecessor, the Canadian region of the United Auto Workers.

The CAW has long been promoted by the middle-class "left" as a bastion of militancy, a supposedly progressive alternative to the "business unionism" practiced by other unions. In the current dispute, organizations like the Communist Party of Canada and the International Socialists are urging the CLC and CAW leaders to reconcile their differences, claiming that a permanent split will weaken "worker solidarity" and impede the unions' "fightback" against big business.

Were it not for the misery and political confusion that the trade unions' and NDP's smothering of working class resistance to big business have wrought, such claims would be laughable.

The current dispute is a by-product of the unions' ever-more explicit subordination of their members' interests to the dictates of big business. In Canada, as throughout the industrialized world, the unions' acceptance of the corporate program of "international competitiveness" has precipitated a steep decline in union membership—the percentage of Canadian workers who are unionized has fallen almost 10 percentage points since 1989—and an even more significant erosion of the union's political influence to the

point where the union bureaucracy's ability to defend its own caste interests is threatened.

The NDP, the political party founded by the union bureaucracy, has been all but obliterated from the political map, a consequence of it having come to power in the country's most populous province only to impose sweeping social spending cuts and a wage-cutting "social contract."

At its crudest level, the jurisdictional dispute between the CAW and the SEIU involves a struggle over the dwindling pool of unionized workers. But it also indicates the real fears within the union officialdom over how to contend with an increasingly restless rank and file.

The immediate issue in dispute between the CLC and the CAW is the fate of 30,000 of the 80,000 Canadian members of the SEIU, a union which represents janitors, nursing home and hospital workers.

In February of last year, Ken Brown, the then Canadian vice-president of the SEIU, organized a meeting at which the leaders of eight Ontario SEIU locals voted to bolt their parent union and join the CAW. Within days of seceding from the SEIU, the dissident locals transferred all their liquid assets to the CAW. Previously, Brown had been spearheading an effort for greater autonomy for the Canadian SEIU locals, which was premised on the claim that the SEIU's abject failure to defend its members wages, jobs, and working conditions in the face of government budget cuts and private employers' concession demands was because the union's Washington-based leadership was oblivious to Canadian concerns.

The CLC constitution does permit dissident locals to disaffiliate from their parent body and ultimately join another affiliate, but not before going through a years' long procedure. Confident that it had the backing of the local SEIU leaders, the CAW chose to ignore this procedure, a decision which brought a quick and angry response from the CLC hierarchy. The SEIU placed all eight locals under trusteeship, fired their elected leaders, brought a \$5.5 million lawsuit against some thirty SEIU officials who were involved in the defection to the CAW and appealed to the CLC to impose sanctions against the CAW for "raiding." On April 14, a CLC arbitrator found the CAW guilty of raiding and on July 1, after attempts to reach a negotiated settlement failed, the CLC suspended the CAW.

At present, it is unclear to which union the bulk of the SEIU's original 30,000 strong-Ontario membership will belong. Where collective agreements have expired, the CAW has availed itself of labor code provisions that allow workers to switch unions to force union representation votes. Most of these have gone in the CAW's favor and it now claims to have gained more than 8,000 former SEIU members through such votes.

The CLC is resting its case on the need for all affiliates to abide by a common set of rules, noting that in the past the CAW has itself made recourse to the very rules governing jurisdictional disputes that it has now chosen to ignore. The CAW, for its part, is making a show of standing for rank-and-file democracy and Canadian "union autonomy."

Ongoing exchanges between the CLC and the CAW indicate there is faint hope the rift will be bridged. The CAW has continued to woo other

SEIU locals. Last November, the CLC proposed a two-year moratorium on CAW efforts to enlist SEIU members at which time the fate of the disputed SEIU locals would be decided by a rank-and-file vote. The CAW responded by setting March 29th of this year as the deadline for final representation votes to determine the affiliation of members in the eight locals.

Despite his recent renegacy, CAW President Buzz Hargrove has been faithful to the bureaucratic apparatus and procedures of the trade union movement throughout his career. There is no question that the addition of the 30,000 SEIU members would significantly increase the dues income of the CAW and just as importantly greatly extend the CAW's presence in the public sector. But this alone cannot explain Hargrove's actions. Nor do the claims of the CLC leadership to be upholding order and due procedure "in the house of labor" explain why they would risk a split that can only gravely comprise the CLC's credibility.

When Hargrove's argument that the CLC must be responsive to rank-and-file dissent is interrogated, what emerges is his fear that if the CAW does not try to harness this dissent it has the potential to become a threat to the union officialdom as a whole. As for the CLC leadership's response, it reflects not only the resentment of rival bureaucrats that the CAW is poaching their members, but their fear that any restructuring of the unions not tightly-controlled from above could escape their control.

As its dispute with the CLC has widened, the CAW leadership has sought to justify its actions by posing as a militant alternative to the union establishment. A report to a CAW conference last December declared, "It is painful to recognize, but many of Canada's official labour bodies have become increasingly bureaucratic, ineffective, and inactive over recent years. Even under the leadership of someone as dynamic and widely respected as (former CAW President) Bob White, the CLC proved increasingly unable to carry out activist campaigns and struggles (no matter how many 'action resolutions' were passed at CLC conventions)."

In an open letter to the union movement, Hargrove has pointed to the split that led to the CAW's creation in 1985 as embodying its fight for democracy and national autonomy. "Many CAW members know firsthand the difficulties of dealing with U.S. union officials. We formed an independent union 15 years ago precisely because U.S. union leaders—even in a relatively progressive union, the UAW—refused to give up their control over our affairs. Since then, numerous other groups have joined the CAW, many after enduring decades of misrepresentation, poor service, or outright corruption and repression at the hands of U.S. unions."

The balance sheet of the CAW's breakaway from the UAW shows something quite different and reveals the true validity of the CAW's claims to represent a progressive alternative for workers.

As Bob White, the CAW's founding president, admitted in his autobiography *Hard Bargains*, he led the secession of the Canadian division of the union because he feared and opposed the prospect of a united struggle by Canadian and U.S. autoworkers against the concessions policy of the UAW leadership. The UAW leadership well-recognized this and that is why, notwithstanding their vitriol against White, they gave the CAW \$42 million at its formation. Moreover, the splitting of North America's auto workers into rival union organizations has assisted the auto makers in pitting workers in one country against those in the other.

And what of the CAW's claims to represent a bastion of militancy? The truth is the entire strategy of the CAW has been based on the more than 25 percent labor cost advantage that the auto makers enjoy in Canada due to the low value of the Canadian dollar and the state-financed national health plan.

The CAW leadership is acutely aware of this cost differential and has repeatedly appealed to the auto makers on this basis to close plants and cut jobs south of the border. Last fall, within days of Daimler-Chrysler installing a new management team at Chrysler, Hargrove flew to Detroit to "educate" Chrysler's new bosses about the importance of Canada to

their operations. Then when Chrysler announced massive job cuts, the CAW was quick to come to agreement with the company on an early retirement scheme so the company could slash its workforce without the threat of a rank-and-file revolt.

Unlike the UAW, the CAW has continued to grow, but this is because the CAW has succeeded in merging with numerous other unions, sometimes, as in the case of the Newfoundland fishermen's union, in defiance of their American union headquarters. While in 1985 auto-related jobs accounted for 75 percent of the CAW's membership, by 1997 that figure had shrunk to less than 25 percent.

Hargrove has repeatedly made pointed criticisms of the NDP for adopting the agenda of big business. Those subjected to such criticism have often replied by noting that Hargrove is a vigorous defender of the corporate interests of the companies that employ his members.

In particular, Hargrove has clashed with other CLC leaders over the unions' failed opposition to the Ontario Tory government, which has spearheaded the Canadian bourgeoisie's offensive against the working class. But Hargrove joined with the rest of the union officialdom in working to scuttle a 1997 strike by Ontario teachers that threatened to become a political struggle directed at driving the Tories from power. Then in the 1999 provincial election, the CAW called for "strategic voting" for the Liberals, who ran on a program that in many respects was to the right of the Harris Tories.

In the current reactionary political climate where workers' rights and living standards are assailed on all fronts, it is telling that so much effort is being spent by their union leaders in waging an internecine war which is essentially over a threatened dues base. The conclusion must be drawn that neither the leadership of the CAW nor of the CLC represent the interests of working people. On the contrary, they both work to subordinate the working class to the dictates of capital and to divide workers on national lines.

To mount a counter-offensive against big business, the working class will have to organize itself on a radically different basis—the perspective of international socialism.



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