

Canadian Auto Workers bureaucrats fete Ontario's Liberal Premier

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In yet another example of the inexorable shift to the right of the Canadian Auto Workers union bureaucracy, CAW President Buzz Hargrove ushered Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty onto the podium of a CAW National Council meeting in Port Elgin, Ontario, April 13.

"I believe this (Liberal provincial) government has done an incredible job for people," gushed Hargrove. McGuinty's appearance marked the first time in the CAW's history that an Ontario premier had been invited to address the CAW leadership. Hargrove went on to tell the 800 delegates assembled at the union's Lake Huron retreat that he was "absolutely thrilled" to introduce McGuinty, whom he characterized as a "champion" of the automobile industry.

Ontario's Liberal premier returned the compliments. "The CAW," he affirmed, "has always been a force for good across Canada and we are rolling in the same direction."

Hargrove's embrace of McGuinty is the CAW bureaucracy's response to an unprecedented crisis in the auto industry that threatens the jobs, wages and pensions of tens of thousands of current and former auto workers. It is the political corollary to the union's imposition of a new round of concessions at various Big Three plants and its agitation for protectionist measures to defend "Canadian jobs" at the expense of workers in other countries.

The feting of McGuinty is the latest in a series of steps that the leadership of the CAW, the country's largest industrial union, has taken to forge closer ties with the Ontario Liberals and their sister party and the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional national party of government, the federal Liberals.

In the 1999 Ontario election, Hargrove and the CAW called for a "strategic vote" for the Ontario Liberals in select ridings, in the name of defeating the provincial Tory government of Mike Harris, a position effectively endorsed by the leader of Ontario's social democratic party, the New Democratic Party or NDP. Continuing the same tack, Hargrove declared in 2003 during the election campaign that ultimately brought McGuinty and his Liberals to power, "People know how to bring about a change in government and you don't do that by voting for someone who doesn't have a prayer of winning. We are looking at information riding by riding, to see where there are opportunities to knock off a Tory."

With Hargrove's full support the NDP sustained a federal Liberal government headed by Paul Martin, who previously had imposed the greatest social spending and tax cuts in Canadian history, in office for six months in 2005. But Hargrove ran afoul of the NDP leadership when he publicly stumped for Paul Martin and Belinda Stronach, daughter of the boss and principal owner of Magna International, and had his union explicitly call for the reelection of a minority Liberal

government in the January 2006 federal election.

Hargrove responded to a subsequent NDP decision to expel him for having endorsed a rival political party by successfully pressing for the CAW and its locals to disaffiliate from the NDP. This ruptured a decades-long relationship between the CAW and Canada's social democrats. The latter, it should be added, were not too upset to see the severing of the NDP-CAW tie, since they, in response to pressure from big business and the corporate media, have been anxious to refute allegations that they are organizationally and financially dependent on the unions.

In keeping with the CAW's orientation to the Liberals, last month's CAW Council meeting endorsed "strategic voting"—that is supporting the election of Liberal governments—in both this October's Ontario election and the next federal election, so as to prevent Conservative victories. "We need strategic voting to ensure we don't have a majority Conservative government," affirmed Hargrove.

But the CAW, or at least its president, does not rule out supporting select Conservatives. After McGuinty's unprecedented appearance before the CAW leadership, Hargrove told the press that he fully expects to have union members working for all three national parties, including the Conservatives, but only "a small amount for the Tories."

While Hargrove and the CAW bureaucrats laud the McGuinty Liberals, under Liberal rule workers in Canada's most populous province have continued to see their living standards eroded, social services slashed, and jobs lost.

On coming to power in 2003 McGuinty announced, in the tried and true manner of incoming governments, that because the deficit was larger than the ruling Tories had admitted, Liberal election promises were no longer applicable.

Refusing to roll back the all-out legislative assault on working people undertaken by the previous Conservative governments of Mike Harris and Ernie Eves, McGuinty upped the ante even further by imposing a \$900 per person healthcare "premium" that has a disproportionate impact on working people and the poor.

Making further inroads into the province's public healthcare system, McGuinty removed restrictions on private healthcare facilities and ended provincial funding for eye exams, physiotherapy and chiropractic services. His government also reneged on other election promises, removing the cap on hydro electricity rates and refusing to end the Tories vicious clawback of Child Benefit Supplements to the poor that takes \$2,700 per year out of the wallets of single mothers on welfare.

A social advocacy group recently issued a report harshly criticizing the McGuinty Liberals for failing to address the plight of the poor in Ontario. According to the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform

Coalition (ISARC) the poor in the province are worse off now than they were when the Liberals took office. And while the government has made very public certain changes it has introduced, such as a meager raise in the minimum wage to \$8 an hour and a 5 percent increase in welfare rates, the report points out that these measures hardly make up for the erosion in their real value due to rate freezes of a decade or longer. The report also cites the fact that construction has begun on only 6,724 of a promised 20,000 affordable housing units.

Of course none of this is news to Hargrove and the CAW leadership. Why then is Hargrove so enamored of the McGuinty Liberal government? Because it has faithfully upheld the interests of the Big Three, funneling hundreds of millions of dollars in government subsidies into the coffers of Ford, General Motors, and DaimlerChrysler, opposing the federal Conservative government's plans to reach a free-trade pact with South Korea, and lobbying for new regulations limiting greenhouse gas emissions to be tailored for the auto industry.

No less damning is the CAW bureaucracy's response to the massive restructuring now taking place in the North American auto industry.

In March Hargrove and the CAW leadership exhorted workers at the DaimlerChrysler assembly plant in Brampton, just northwest of Toronto, to agree to a significant package of concessions that they had strongly voted down in a February plant-wide vote. Riding roughshod over its own constitution that restricts re-votes on matters duly settled, Hargrove and his assistant Bob Chernecki made it clear to the membership that they must vote to accept \$5,000 in annual givebacks through the elimination of shift premiums, the intensification of work practices, and the contracting out of union janitorial jobs or accept the consequences. Should they reject the concessions, Chrysler would move auto production out of Brampton without opposition from the union bureaucracy. "It's just a matter of smart bargaining," explained Chernecki.

After a heated meeting in which denunciations of the leadership were hurled from the floor, the autoworkers, bitterly noting their total abandonment, ratified the concessions. "A lot of us voted 'no' to speak out against the unfolding mistrust with our union," said Dan Ciurlia, a 27-year plant veteran. "We understand the big threat of globalism. We understand that our jobs can go away. People are scared. But we are being told to make decisions with really no information and very quickly. The workers want to know if the union leadership is truly going to stand up for us."

A grateful DaimlerChrysler summed up the role played by the union in forcing through the concessions package. "We could not have moved forward without the CAW," said company spokesperson Dave Elshoff.

When Chrysler announced cuts of over 2,000 jobs in Windsor, Brampton and West Toronto earlier this year Hargrove characterized the attack on his membership as "a real disaster," but refused to fight the cuts, advising those members on the chopping block to "take whatever package they could get." And last fall when Ford announced a 21 percent production cut and plans to shut nine plants in North America over the next two years, including an engine factory in Windsor, Ontario, the CAW president called it a "mixed result," since the job cuts fell disproportionately on US workers.

The CAW leadership, with the support of various middle class radical groups, presented the breakaway from the UAW in 1985-86 as a rebellion against the right-wing leadership of the International. In reality it was a bureaucratic manoeuvre aimed at derailing an incipient rank-and-file challenge to wage cuts and plant closures and at

facilitating closer collaboration between the union bureaucracy and auto bosses on both sides of the border.

For years, the CAW bureaucracy has sought to impress upon the auto bosses the importance of the so-called "Canadian advantage"—i.e., the fact that their labor costs are significantly lower at their Canadian than at their US operations, due to the differential in the value of the Canadian and US dollars and Canada's state-funded public health insurance scheme, Medicare— "the gift that keeps on giving," according to one Wall Street financial analyst.

But under pressure to take action to prevent major job losses and fearing the erosion of their dues bases, the CAW bureaucrats are becoming ever more blatant in their appeals to the Big Three to recognize that they are the provisioners of cheap labor.

During the 2002 round of collective bargaining, Hargrove lobbied the Wall Street and Bay Street financial houses to pressure the automakers to concentrate their job cuts in the US. During a conference call with J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., Hargrove opined: "The real challenge for all of us if we want to make money is to try to demand that the companies pay more attention to those countries or those communities where the obvious quality, productivity, cost and profitability numbers are there."

The response of the CAW bureaucracy to the current financial crisis of the Big Three has been to deepen its longstanding corporatist relationship with the auto bosses and the big business Liberals. In the name of a "national auto strategy," the CAW lobbies the federal and Ontario governments to make further tax concessions and outright grants to the Big Three to assist them in competing against Toyota, Honda and other foreign-based automakers. Meanwhile it works to pit North American workers against each other in a fratricidal struggle over jobs, actively campaigning for the Big Three to close US and Mexican facilities in preference to those in Canada, while urging Ottawa to adopt aggressive trade war measures against Asian automakers.

Hargrove has already indicated that in the scramble among billionaire investors to seize control of DaimlerChrysler, so as to squeeze out new profits through massive jobs and wage and benefit cuts, he is considering throwing the CAW's support behind a bid being prepared by the Canadian Magna boss Frank Stronach, who for years the CAW reviled for his aggressive antiunion tactics.

The most far-reaching conclusions must be drawn from the dead end into which workers have been driven by the CAW labor bureaucracy. The defense of jobs, working conditions and living standards can be taken forward only through the building of an independent political movement of the working class based on the struggle to unite workers internationally and reorganize economic life along democratic and egalitarian—that is, socialist—principles.



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