Longtime Canadian Auto Workers union chief to retire

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Buzz Hargrove, president of the Canadian Auto Workers union, on July 8 announced his imminent retirement from the presidency of the union he has led since 1992. The retirement, which will take affect this September, comes fully six months ahead of Hargrove's previously expected departure date, and at a time when a deepening crisis in the auto industry, and the economy as a whole, threatens thousands of manufacturing jobs.

This was not the first time this year that the CAW president has made a surprise announcement that moved forward set timetables. Last April, Hargrove secretly advanced the traditional contract negotiation period by some six months in order to ram through massive concession contracts at Ford, General Motors and Chrysler-Cerberus. And only two weeks ago, he announced that the union's National Executive Board (NEB) would push forward a meeting to recommend a successor amongst one of the three candidates who had signaled their intention to lead the union.

In typical bureaucratic fashion Hargrove has moved to install his handpicked successor without even the pretence of a debate or election. This only underscores the disregard and contempt the CAW bureaucracy has for the 225,000 workers who are forced to pay dues to the organization.

"I just thought," stated Hargrove, "if I just leave this (election) open, it's just going to cause all kinds of dissension in the union. So I thought, let's have the debate and agree on a candidate and then let's move ahead and continue to build the union." For Hargrove, the "debate" was never meant to include the union membership. Rather, it was to take place amongst a closed circle of his trusted lieutenants. Indeed, since the CAW split from the United Auto Workers union in 1985, no one has succeeded to the presidency without the endorsement of the senior members of the bureaucracy.

Of course, auto workers were not holding their breath for this or that candidate to emerge from within the union bureaucracy. They have already had too bitter an experience with the union's concession contracts, sweetheart deals, bogus jobs fight-backs and cynical maneuvers with right-wing corporate magnates and big business political parties to become excited by the prospect of one bureaucrat battling another for the lucrative presidential sinecure. After all, the membership has watched as the CAW has transformed itself over the past several decades into a thoroughly anti-working class organization tied entirely to the corporate elite and the institutions of the capitalist state.

If there are complaints from some quarters within the union bureaucracy over the procedures Hargrove has used it is not out of concern for the democratic rights of the membership. Instead it is largely due to rising concern that with the threatened shrinking of the dues paying base through mass layoffs in the manufacturing, airline and retail sectors, the preservation of the entire apparatus is at stake.

Thusly, on the same day that Hargrove declared his intention to retire early, the union's eighteen member National Executive Board gathered to endorse Hargrove's preferred candidate, Ken Lewenza, president of Windsor's 10,000 strong Local 444 and the union's chief negotiator at Chrysler. The endorsement from this cabal of top union officials proved more than enough reason for erstwhile opponents Hemi Mitic and Tom Collins to immediately withdraw from the race and support the bureaucratic anointment.

On the eve of the NEB vote, Mitic and Collins, as well as members of the union's administrative staff, had criticized what they characterized as "strong arm" maneuvers to ensure a Lewenza victory. In a message to the NEB, Collins wrote, "I have been quite amazed by some of the developments this last week which appear to be premature and driven by a need to subject and control

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the democratic constitutional process of our union." Of course, none of these supposed critics raised a peep when only last April Hargrove over-rode the constitutional requirement to assemble the union's collective bargaining council before entering into negotiations with the Big Three. Nor did they oppose the lightning ratification process on the Big Three deals, where members where given in some cases less than 24 hours notice prior to the contract votes.

Both men have been loyal hand-raisers for the bureaucracy for many years. Mitic had recently distinguished himself by spearheading Hargrove's initiative last fall to form a company union at the auto parts giant Magna International, while Collins was granted a position at National Headquarters in return for merging his Retail and Wholesale Workers union with the CAW in 1999.

For his own part, Lewenza, who hails from Hargrove's "home" local in Windsor, was a key member of the collective bargaining team that orchestrated the pattern of massive concessions with the Big Three auto companies this past spring. He was also a key supporter of Hargrove in squashing opposition to the corporatist agreement with Magna when that secret deal caused unrest amongst the membership, particularly in Oshawa and London, Ontario. He has stated that under his leadership, he will continue the policies carried out by Hargrove.

In a press conference held in May to announce the tentative agreements with GM and Chrysler, Hargrove stated that his over-riding bargaining concern was to "get in and out real quick" before things really began to fall apart in the auto industry. He has now extended that sentiment to his own future career.

In the days prior to his retirement announcement, rumblings out of Detroit and the New York financial markets pointed to a renewed round of retrenchments at General Motors. GM's stock price fell to its half-century low July 2 after a Merrill Lynch analyst asserted that the auto firm needed to raise as much as $15 billion in cash to shore up its liquidity and that bankruptcy was "not impossible." In the credit derivatives market, the cost of default protection for both GM and Ford is hovering around its highest levels ever. Standard and Poor's last month put GM, along with Ford Motor and Chrysler, on credit watch. Peter Schiff, president of Euro-Pacific Capital opined, "The question now is who will go into bankruptcy first, GM or Ford?"

Meanwhile, in a portent of things to come, Tim Carrie, president of London's CAW Local 27 and 3M plant chairperson Randy Mason announced that the union has re-opened a contract for its 240 tape and sandpaper makers and agreed to relinquish wage increases, cost of living protections and gut work rules. Although the signed contract took the membership through until 2010, Mason stated, "We did not have to do anything, but the bottom line is we came to an agreement and gave the company some relief." Neither Hargrove nor Lewenza passed comment on this unprecedented concession even under conditions where there is already talk that the Big Three will re-open UAW contracts in the US in the near future.

Speculation is rife that Hargrove—a loyal defender of Canadian capitalism—will stand for election to federal parliament in the next national poll. He has stated that although no political party has yet to approach him, he is more than interested in standing for the Liberals, or failing that, as an independent. Liberal Party leader Stephane Dion has already sent out recruitment feelers.

Hargrove made headlines several years ago when he embraced right wing Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin and recommended union members vote "strategically" (i.e. for the Liberal Party) in most federal and/or provincial ridings in a series of elections. Although a long time supporter of the New Democratic Party, Hargrove in recent years has fallen afoul of the party officialdom, particularly in Ontario, the center of the auto industry in Canada, where he was expelled from the party over his calls for strategic voting.

But whether or not Hargrove seeks political office, there is no doubt that he will land solidly on his feet. He has already received several lucrative offers from Canadian universities and other institutions, not to mention a nomination to the prestigious Order of Canada. The black tie gala organized in his honour only last month and attended by the pillars of the Canadian establishment is further testimony to the services rendered to the captains of Canadian industry. And as no less a corporate figure as Arturo Elias, GM Canada's president, told the *Detroit News* after Hargrove's retirement announcement, "Buzz has had a remarkable career leading the CAW, steering it through growth and maturity as Canada's largest private sector union. Well done, Buzz!"

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