

Canadian Auto Workers union lobbies for military contracts

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The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union has ratcheted up its nationalist "Buy Canadian" campaign in response to the deepening world economic crisis—a crisis that resulted in the elimination of close to 150,000 full-time jobs in Canada in the last two months of 2008 and has brought the Detroit automakers to the brink of bankruptcy.

The CAW's "Buy Canadian" campaign is diametrically opposed to, and meant to prevent the development of, a genuine struggle in defence of the jobs, wages and rights of workers. It is predicated on slavish acceptance of the dictatorship of big business—of the subordination of socio-economic life, including workers' jobs, to the corporate drive for profit—and serves to pit Canadian workers against their class brothers and sisters in other countries.

While the CAW and other unions in Canada shout "Buy Canadian," the labor bureaucrats elsewhere counter with "Buy American," "Buy British," or "Buy Japanese" campaigns.

The promotion of protectionism and trade war goes hand-in-hand with the unions' efforts to "save" jobs by ensuring corporate "competitiveness," through wage cuts, speed-up and job-cutting work-rule changes.

The CAW, like the UAW in the US, is currently in the midst of imposing another round of massive concessions on workers at the Big Three to satisfy Washington's and Ottawa's demand that any auto industry bailout be conditional on reducing workers' wages and benefits to the levels prevailing at the non-union Japanese transplant operations in the southern US.

The reactionary character of the CAW's "Buy Canadian" campaign is underscored by its recent appeals to the federal Conservative government to speed up military procurement and ensure that new equipment for the Canadian Armed Forces be built in Canada.

The Conservatives, led by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, have placed the revival of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as an instrument of war at the center of their agenda, extending and expanding the CAF's leading

role in the Afghan war and announcing ambitious plans to re-arm the military.

The CAW is urging the government to revisit a recent decision by Public Works Canada to award a military truck contract to a Navistar assembly plant south of the border. A division of International Trucks, Navistar maintains facilities in Canada, the United States and Mexico. It was the only company to bid on a C\$254 million contract to build a new fleet of 1,300 medium-duty logistics trucks for the Canadian military. The company has earmarked the contract for its Garland, Texas, facility.

In a letter to the Conservative Minister of Defence, Peter MacKay, CAW president Ken Lewenza wrote, "Canadians would agree that our military should have the best equipment to deal with their requirements.... [But] if we are going to try and stimulate the economy in Canada and specifically, where manufacturing is at an all time low and job loss is unprecedented, your government must recognize how critical it is to ensure Canadian tax dollars are spent to put Canadians to work."

The CAW is seeking to "make hay" from the Public Works announcement by linking the steady stream of layoffs at Navistar's Chatham, Ontario, heavy truck assembly plant with the awarding of the military contract to the firm's Texas operation.

Over the next few weeks, truck production at the Chatham facility will be reduced from 100 vehicles per day to just 40. Some of the reduced production will be made up at a low-wage plant in Escobido, Mexico. However, the lion's share is being eliminated and may never be restored. More than 2,300 North American trucking firms have collapsed in the past year as sky-rocketing fuel prices followed rapidly by the ongoing economic crisis laid low an entire industry.

Navistar announced last week that 200 workers at the plant would be laid off on March 1. Only last November, the company issued layoff notices to an additional 500 workers. Those cuts will take affect at the end of January. After the March layoffs, 180 workers will remain in the plant and 80 more in the offices. At the peak of production only 10 years

ago, the plant employed almost 1,800 workers.

The company is committed under the current contract with the CAW to produce no fewer than 35 vehicles per day for the first quarter of this year. Daily production will drop further in the spring. When the collective agreement expires on June 1, many fear that the plant will be permanently closed. Already, one of Navistar's main competitors, Daimler AG Sterling Trucks in nearby St. Thomas, Ontario, has announced the final closure of its Freightliner plant for March with the attendant layoff of 1,300 workers.

In 2003, a year after the conclusion of a bitter six-week strike in Chatham that saw the CAW sign away C\$44 million in concessions, Navistar accepted C\$35 million from the Ontario government and C\$30 million from Ottawa in a bailout package designed to keep the plant from being shuttered.

Both Navistar corporate spokesmen and Conservative Party Members of Parliament have defended the military contract decision. In a statement issued from Navistar's headquarters in Chicago, Illinois, Roy Wiley said that as the Chatham facility is tooled only for heavy-duty trucks, it would be too costly to reconfigure the assembly line to accommodate the lighter-duty model specified in the government tender. Public Works Minister Christian Paradis supported the company's position. In a brief statement, he asserted, "The proposal was [evaluated] and the Government of Canada negotiated with the company to ensure the best overall value for Canadian taxpayers."

The CAW and Chatham-Kent Labour Council are mounting a protest outside the office of the local Conservative MP, Dave Van Kesteren, today, January 24, to press their demand that the government force Navistar to shift the military-truck contract to its Chatham plant. The unions however will mount no challenge to Navistar's "right" to eliminate jobs.

The CAW's campaign for military contracts to be used to support Canadian manufacturing dovetails with demands from the right wing, the Canadian military, and Canadian arms manufacturers for speeded-up and increased military procurements to be an important part of any federal government economic stimulus package.

The Conference of Defence Associations (CDA), a pro-military lobby group with intimate connections to the military and arms manufacturers, has argued that increased military spending is fully consistent with the stated goals of the government's stimulus package: that initiatives be "timely," "maximize" economic benefits to Canada, and conform with the government's long-term policies.

Specifically, the CDA is urging the government to modernize the physical infrastructure at Canadian military bases and other Defence Department facilities and build

three naval supply vessels. Last year, the government cancelled the naval project after both the final bids exceeded the money budgeted for the project.

"An investment in the capital renewal of the [Defence] Department's physical infrastructure would certainly meet the criteria you have established," declared CDA Chairman and retired CAF Lieutenant-General Richard Evraire in a December 16 statement, to the government's "National consultation on budget actions to protect Canada's economy." "The investment," said Evraire, "will benefit local contractors and labour such that the economic benefits will remain in Canada."

Similarly, the naval contract would be, said Evraire, a means of promoting "industrial and regional development," in accordance with "the government's Buy Canada policy" and its "Canada First Defence Policy." (Released last May, the Conservatives' "Canada First Defence Policy" calls for Ottawa to spend C\$490 billion so as to give Canada, in the words of Prime Minister Harper, "the capacity to act" on the world stage, ensuring thereby that the aims and interests of the Canadian elite will "be taken seriously in the world.")

The CAW and New Democratic Party MP Peter Stoffer mounted a joint appeal in Halifax January 15 for the Conservatives to include the naval vessels project and the purchase of 12 coast guard vessels in its stimulus package. "The federal Conservative government," declared the CAW's Atlantic Director Les Holloway, "must immediately push ahead with plans to build these three [navy] ships and it must build them in Canada."

Both the CAW and the social-democratic NDP claim to oppose Canada's leading role in the war to prop up the US-installed government in Afghanistan. But in the interests of bringing to power a Liberal-led coalition government in Ottawa, the NDP has announced it is ready to set aside its opposition to the war—that is to say, it is ready to serve in a government that will wage the war at least through 2011. Similarly, the NDP has said that in the interests of allying with the Liberals, it will abandon its opposition to the C\$50 billion five-year Liberal-Conservative plan to slash corporate taxes.

As for the CAW, it is one of the most fervent advocates of the coalition.



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