

Canadian Labour Congress pleads for bosses to recognize unions' role in suppressing worker unrest

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In response to Ontario Conservative party leader Tim Hudak's proposals to rewrite the province's labour laws, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) president Ken Georgetti has penned an op-ed piece extolling the value of unions in increasing corporate profitability, controlling wage demands and policing the workforce.

In June, Hudak, who is attempting to outflank Ontario Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty on the political right, issued a party white paper entitled "Paths to Prosperity: Flexible Labour Markets." The white paper is the Conservative Party response to McGuinty's moves to abrogate collective bargaining rights and freeze wages across-the-board for more than 1 million Ontario public sector workers. It calls for changes to labour laws patterned after US "right-to-work" legislation. In particular it would make it more difficult to win union recognition and abolish the Rand formula, which provides for the "automatic check-off" of dues from all workers covered by a collective agreement irrespective of whether they belong to the union.

Based on the arbitration ruling issued by Judge Ivan Rand to end a historic 99-day strike at Ford Motor Company's Windsor, Ontario facilities in 1945, the Rand formula was subsequently incorporated in the Canada Labour Code and the labour laws of most provinces.

It was designed to diffuse a militant strike wave in the immediate post-war period; institutionalized union organization and a state-managed collective bargaining system; established the conditions for the unfettered expansion of union bureaucracy and helped usher in an era of relative class compromise in Canadian industry that was underpinned by the post Second World War boom. No longer would the vast majority of major industrial conglomerates block union recognition. In exchange, any challenge by leftward moving workers to corporate property rights and the company's "right to manage" would be aggressively combated by the union leaderships through the isolation and ultimate purging of

militants from the labour movement.

The unions and the union-supported NDP have long pointed to the right-wing policy prescriptions of Hudak and his Conservatives to justify their close collaboration with the Liberals. Last spring, the NDP facilitated passage of a Liberal austerity budget, whose centerpiece was a two-year public sector wage freeze and that also calls for more than \$15 billion in spending cuts over the next four years.

The Canadian Labour Congress' response to Hudak's white paper further illustrates the extent to which the trade unions have become junior partners in the corporate drive to reduce the living standards of the working class.

In July, Georgetti penned an op-ed piece entitled "Hey Hudak: You've Got Unions All Wrong." Published on the *Huffington Post* web site and reproduced on the CLC's own site, Georgetti's article is a plea to big business to recognize the role unions' play in suppressing worker discontent.

"If workers are left with no outlet to seek fair compensation and working conditions," warns Georgetti, "they will find other means of collective expression. Their frustration could result in spontaneous work disruptions, with a profound effect on productivity. The government [with their attacks on union rights] is setting the stage for an explosion of wage demands in the future, when unemployment falls and labour markets tighten. After years of frustration and stagnant wages, workers will insist on catching up. Heavy-handed government intervention, as we've seen at Canada Post, Air Canada and CP Rail (with back-to-work legislation), invites lingering resentment and will take all those outstanding issues to subsequent bargaining."

In this era of rare and invariably union-isolated strikes and massive concession contracts rammed through by the union officialdom, the CLC feels it necessary to warn the ruling elite that it should not underestimate the services that they render to

them.

If the union apparatus is undermined, argues Georgetti, you will be faced with a workforce un-harnessed from its shop-floor policemen. There will be wildcat strikes, sick-outs, absenteeism--maybe even sabotage. Productivity will be damaged. Profits will suffer.

Hudak's white paper is part of an international ruling class assault on worker rights. But if it has so excited the union leadership—much more than has McGuinty's wage freeze although the latter is actually being implemented—it is because an attack on the automatic dues check-off system would threaten the fat salaries and expense accounts of the well-heeled union bureaucrats. And would do so under conditions where they are keenly aware of the widespread resentment rank-and-file workers feel toward them for collecting hefty monthly union dues while doing nothing and frequently worse than nothing to defend their interests.

The timing of Georgetti's warning about wildcat strikes is not accidental. Over the last few months, workers have fought to break-out of the straightjacket of official trade unionism. Last February, hospital workers in Edmonton walked off the job in wildcat strike action. In March, Air Canada pilots staged a coordinated sick-out that disrupted scores of flights. A week later, Air Canada ground crews staged a nationwide one-day wildcat in protest against the federal government's anti-strike legislation and in April Quebec neonatal nurses struck against untenable working conditions.

In July thousands of construction workers took wildcat strike action in Newfoundland, bringing a mega-construction project for Vale Inc. to a standstill for five days and defying a court injunction. The workers were protesting the abrogation of contract provisions in the no-strike contract and the piling up of over 160 grievances. Union officials worked to end the strike, arguing to the media that there were no grounds for their members' complaints and threatening to assist the company by recruiting replacement workers through their hiring halls.

At the time, the utter contempt for the strikers was put on full display by Gus Doyle, the leader of the construction unions. Speaking with all the arrogance of a colonial viceroy addressing a native population, he mused over the growing membership resistance to his officials' back-to-work diktats. "I'll just use my own kids as an example," he said. "I mean, a child will ask you something and they have an answer in mind, and if you don't give it to them, then you're wrong and that's the case here today."

The resurgence of wildcat strikes and other non-union sanctioned rank-and-file workplace action is a nascent rebellion against the deepening onslaught of big business and its political representatives on worker living standards and rights and against the impotence and complicity of the state-recognized

and -supported union apparatuses. But such actions cannot in themselves resolve the crisis facing workers today.

In two recent rulings by government appointed labour arbitrators, concession laden contracts were handed down that accepted all the demands put forward by Air Canada management after a series of protracted contract disputes. The rulings came in the wake of the wildcat and sick-outs staged earlier by pilots and baggage handlers who had rejected concessions contracts foisted on them by their union leaderships, and then subsequently protested against government back-to-work orders and other grievances.

For Air Canada ground crews the ruling will impose wage rises lower than the rate of inflation and a two-tier pension system. The arbitrator also provided the company with extended relief on its previous obligations to pay into the pension scheme. In the case of the pilots, the arbitrator, in a ruling last week, cleared the way for management to introduce a new, low-cost airline that will result in the loss of up to 1,100 jobs, lower wage rates and extend required monthly flight hours, thereby endangering flight safety.

In striving to break out of the trade-union strait jacket, workers must seek to develop new rank-and-file organizations, led by their most trusted militant colleagues, so as to mount their struggles independently of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist unions.

While essential in promoting a working-class counteroffensive in defence of jobs and worker rights, such action will only bring enduring gains if it is conceived of as a political struggle against the parties, governments and entire state machinery that upholds capitalist exploitation and social inequality. To defeat big business, workers need their own socialist political party which has as its aim the establishment of a workers' government to nationalize corporations such as Air Canada and turn them into public utilities democratically controlled by working people and run in the interests of society as a whole.



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