

Ontario teachers' union president "fights" Liberals, then becomes their candidate

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Ken Coran, the just retired president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), was nominated Tuesday night as the Liberal Party candidate for an upcoming provincial by-election in London, Ontario.

His uncontested nomination came only weeks after the winding down of a year-long dispute between teachers' unions and the big business Ontario Liberal government. Coran's name had originally been floated last November by the Liberals as a possible future candidate, but, as explained by Liberal official Scott Courtice, "the timing wasn't right."

Indeed, last fall and winter over 100,000 teachers in elementary and high schools across the province mobilized to reject the Liberals' anti-democratic Bill 115 which suspended collective bargaining rights, froze wages, imposed sweeping concessions on sick-day provisions and outlawed the right-to-strike.

During the dispute both Coran (and Elementary teachers' union head Sam Hammond) worked might and main to contain teachers' outrage against the government's attacks. In his role as OSSTF president, Coran occasionally found it necessary to denounce the government of then Premier Dalton McGuinty so as to assuage his seething membership and better position himself to scuttle the opposition to the Liberals and their austerity demands.

To burnish his "anti-government" credentials, the OSSTF president mobilized his members to campaign to defeat the Liberals in a crucial by-election in Kitchener last September and signed on to a court challenge against McGuinty's legislated suspension of the collective bargaining process.

But Coran, a longtime member of the Liberal provincial riding association in London, had been a fervent supporter of the McGuinty government since the former premier was first elected ten years ago. From very early on in

negotiations for new teachers' contracts last summer and fall, Coran (and Hammond) agreed with the Liberal demands for a wage freeze and other concessions, but insisted that their role as well-paid interlocutors between their members and the local school boards must not be overridden by government fiat.

Both men worked to contain the genuine anger of rank-and-file teachers by first proposing mild (and often voluntary) work-to-rule campaigns. Then in late November they sent three contracts accepting Liberal concession demands to local memberships—two of which were soundly rejected. Localized and token one-day strikes by elementary school teachers just prior to the Christmas break were not extended as both Hammond and Coran bowed to a January Ontario Labour Board ruling declaring that any further job action was illegal.

No sooner was Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty replaced by his long-time ally Kathleen Wynne in late January than the teachers' unions began negotiations with the government to "regularize" the contracts imposed by legislative fiat under Bill 115. At the same time, they empowered their pension fund representatives to quietly negotiate pension give-backs in a separate side-arrangement that was never put to the membership for a vote. In April, the OSSTF pushed through a "negotiated" concessionary contract virtually identical to that imposed under Bill 115. A deal with Hammond's elementary school union followed shortly thereafter.

The nomination of Coran by the Liberals has caused a certain degree of consternation amongst the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP). With strong backing from the unions, the provincial NDP has propped up the Liberal minority government in consecutive confidence motions on their austerity budgets.

In the spring of 2012, the NDP ensured the adoption of a Liberal budget that made sweeping social spending

cuts—cuts larger than those the hated Conservative government of Mike Harris imposed in the 1990s as part of its “Common Sense Revolution.” The centerpiece of the Liberal budget was a two-year public-sector wage freeze. When the Liberals subsequently imposed contracts on the teachers, the NDP, like Coran and Hammond, feigned opposition. However, no sooner did the Liberals replace McGuinty with Wynne, one of his longtime cabinet ministers who had herself voted for Bill 115, than the NDP and unions signaled that they were eager to resume their close collaboration with the Liberals and sustain them in office.

In May, the NDP, backed by the unions, voted to support a Liberal budget that extended and deepened the government’s austerity measures, by pledging to limit the total increase in government spending to 1 percent annually through 2017 and to provide no additional money for public sector wage increases until the budget is balanced four years hence. Fittingly the legislative session ended with Wynne and Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath embracing on the floor of the provincial parliament.

NDP officials have denounced Coran as a turncoat, claiming he was a supporter of the provincial NDP’s London West by-election candidate as late as last month, and also a member of the federal NDP at least eighteen months ago. It seems, however, that Coran also held a membership with the local London Liberal association. When asked when he last carried a membership card for the NDP, Coran answered, “I’m going to have to get back to you on that. I couldn’t give you a defined date.”

What most concerns the NDP in this whole sordid affair is the ever-more trenchant exposure of their political perspective as virtually indistinguishable from that of the big business Liberal Party. Coran, a former union president, can simultaneously carry the banner of both parties without compunction because the NDP and the Liberals are two sides of the same austerity coin.

Ontario Federation of Labour president Sid Ryan—a prominent NDP member and strong advocate of the party sustaining the minority Liberal government in office—refused, for his part, to attack Coran. Rather he opined that his nomination further “complicates” the labour bureaucracy’s choice of which candidate to support in the August 1 London West by-election.

While Ryan, the quintessential Ontario union bureaucrat-in-chief, is “befuddled”—and most certainly embarrassed in the bargain—by Coran’s Liberal nomination, rank-and-file teachers have hastened to record their outrage.

A letter signed by teachers at Nepean High School near Ottawa and sent to their union expressed “outrage”, “anger” and “utter betrayal.” The letter went on to note, “It now appears that while OSSTF members were attending rallies far and wide, withdrawing their voluntary services, and even engaging in limited strike action to fight for our collective bargaining rights, Ken Coran was more concerned with delivering his own members to the Liberal government in order to ensure he had a position in the party when his term with OSSTF was over.”

Reader comments in the *London Free Press* and other provincial newspapers held similar sentiments. One teacher wrote, “There hasn’t been a bigger traitor since Judas Iscariot.” Another stated, “Perfect timing Mr. Coran. The last day of school is a great time to announce your candidacy for a party that utterly betrayed the public school teachers. As a high school teacher who lost substantially due to the imposition of Bill 115, I have to ask how committed you really were to our cause.”

Another blogger struck close to the heart of the matter. “Now there will be some who argue that Coran will be better in a position to influence policy from the inside. Most though will see Coran as a traitor to the cause. Me? No, I don’t see him as a traitor. A traitor is someone who betrays you. Who was your friend and joins the other side. Nah, Ken Coran was never a friend of the teachers, and neither are the unions. They are the cop in the workplace. There to enforce the rule. Oh, sure. They squawk a little about certain things, but fundamentally they are no different. Opportunist? Sure. A hypocrite in light of his rhetoric? Absolutely. A traitor? Not for a long time.”

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