

Canada: Unifor—a bureaucratic apparatus for suppressing the working class

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The merger of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) into a new union, Unifor Canada, is a bureaucratic maneuver of the union officialdom. It is aimed at shoring up the union apparatus under conditions where the authority and influence of the unions have been enormously eroded as a result of their decades of betrayals.

No amount of hoopla—this weekend’s founding convention features a free rock concert, live-streamed video of all the proceedings, and “high profile” guest speakers—can cover for the fact that the creation of a 300,000 member “super-union” offers nothing more for the workers trapped inside the new organization than continuing concession-laden contracts, speed-up, layoffs and the craven collaboration of union officials with company managements and big-business governments.

The new union’s proposed founding document makes clear that the motivation behind the merger is the massive decline in the percentage of the Canadian workforce that is unionized. Since the late 1970s the percentage of Canada’s workforce in trade unions has fallen by 10 percentage points to just over 29 percent of the total workforce. The decline in membership is particularly acute in the private sector where today less than 16 percent of workers belong to a union.

Even more dramatic is the decline in strikes. Since the 1970s the incidence of work stoppages due to strikes has decreased five-fold to infinitesimal levels. Today, if workers find themselves on a picket line, it is more likely due to a company lockout than a strike.

In the days preceding the founding convention, the leaderships of the CEP and CAW have made much ballyhoo over new provisions in the proposed Unifor constitution that allow for the inclusion of a new form of membership open to workers who are not currently in a workplace with a collective agreement. These nonunion and unemployed workers will be permitted to join Unifor and enroll in union-organized insurance and credit card schemes.

The bureaucratic excitement over the arrangement is directly related to the rapidly increasing pace of de-unionization. Concerned that an ever-eroding dues base is threatening the bloated salaries and generous expense accounts of the union officialdom, unions across the globe have desperately sought out new ways to buttress their incomes. The “associate” member provision dovetails with another undertaking by Unifor to commit ten percent of its annual dues intake towards union organizing drives.

Such arrangements, however, fail to address the pivotal question: why have the unions proven utterly incapable of keeping their members, let alone attracting new ones?

While the unions have always accepted the inviolability of capitalism and sought to restrict the working class within the narrow confines of collective bargaining and parliamentary policies, they were in an earlier period often associated with significant social struggles and did to some degree defend the daily needs of workers.

However, in the last two decades of the twentieth century the unions ceased to function even as defensive organizations of the working class. They rejected—as attested by the virtual cessation of strikes—any connection to the class struggle, embraced economic nationalism, and adopted a policy of collaborating with the corporations and the government in cutting the wages and benefits of union members.

The same process has unfolded among trade unions in every part of the world. The basic cause of this transformation was not the subjective characteristics of union leaders, but profound changes in world economy—above all, the globalization of capitalist production.

This process completely undermined all of the old labour organizations, which were rooted in the national economy and the national labour market. Under conditions where transnational corporations could shift production to virtually any country in search of cheaper labour, the unions, already thoroughly bureaucratized, sought to defend their financial and institutional interests by pressuring their members to work harder for less, in an attempt to convince the employers to continue to “do business” with the union bureaucracy and maintain a modicum of production within the national borders.

The union bureaucrats of the CEP and the CAW blame the rapacious attack on the jobs, wages and benefits of their members on the advancement of a “neoliberal” agenda by the ruling elite beginning some thirty years ago and based on “greed, financialization and globalization.” If only big business and the Canadian government could return to policies of Keynesian “prime the pump” spending, nationalist tariff walls and a dollar significantly priced below the American greenback, then the onslaught against workers’ living standards could be lessened.

But such an analysis, promoting one set of capitalist economic policies over another, ignores the most fundamental point: that the financialization and globalization of the world economy and the

concomitant destruction of workers' living standards were the direct spawn of a capitalist system in crisis. The response of the unions to the emergence of a global labour market has been to join with the bosses in demanding workers make their employers more "competitive," i.e. accept concessions, speed-up and job cuts, and to promote economic nationalism.

Indeed, the birth of the CAW itself sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers and gave a huge opening for the Big Three auto companies to begin their practice of "whip-sawing" contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border. Following its 1985 split with the UAW, the CAW based its collaboration with the employers on the labor cost advantages of a weak dollar and subsidized health care. This "advantage" has since been eliminated through savage wage cuts in the US and the devaluation of the US dollar and has spurred on a "race to the bottom"—in which the CAW and UAW compete as to which can offer the Detroit Three the highest profits.

This nationalist perspective has also informed the policies of the CEP. In the run-up to the Unifor founding convention, the CEP alongside the CAW have blocked with the Big Three telecommunications carriers in Canada (Bell, Rogers and Telus) to lobby the federal government to withdraw plans to allow foreign carriers to bid on new wireless spectrum availability. The American-based carrier Verizon has expressed interest in taking part in the wireless auction as an initial step in a potential full-blown entry into the Canadian market. Outgoing CEP president Dave Coles has fulminated that such a move would encroach on the "nation-building" process as if the profit maximization strategies of the Canadian carriers operate in any way differently from other telecommunication giants.

The unanimous endorsement of long-time CAW functionary Jerry Dias for Unifor president by the Executive Committees of the two unions (and their retiring leaders Ken Lewenza and Dave Coles) is proof positive that these nationalist and corporatist policies will be seamlessly transposed to the new organization. Dias, a CAW official in the national office since 1993 and son of a former president of the union's De Havilland Aerospace local in Toronto, was the union's point man in negotiating a whole series of plant closure deals and diffusing plant occupations in the Ontario auto industry over the past five years.

The Proposals Committee for the CAW-CEP merger has put off until a further date discussion on the new union's political strategy. Since its founding in 1992, the CEP has stuck through thick and thin with the New Democratic Party (NDP). As the NDP has hurtled ever-further to the right, the CEP has responded by redoubling its efforts to elect social democrats to provincial and national parliaments. Indeed, such has been its loyalty that as one of the so-called "pink unions", it supported the "social contract" imposed by the Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae in the 1990s, which tore up existing union contracts to impose wage and job cuts on a million public sector workers

The CAW, on the other hand, has spearheaded the drive for "strategic voting," repeatedly backing a majority of Liberal Party candidates in both federal and Ontario provincial elections. In the 2006 federal election, then CAW President Buzz Hargrove

campaigned for Paul Martin, who as Finance Minister had imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. In 2011 the CAW campaigned for the reelection of the Ontario Liberal government, while knowing full well that it was preparing to impose sweeping austerity measures.

In Quebec, the CEP and CAW are staunch allies of the big-business Parti Quebecois, which with their support eliminated tens of thousands of public sector jobs between 1996 and 1998 in the name of its "zero deficit" drive.

While there may be some future frictions over Unifor's electoral tactics, that this has not stalled the merger process is hardly surprising given that the differences between the Liberals, until recently the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government, and the NDP have all but disappeared. Tellingly, in the 2012 NDP leadership race, the CEP initially supported Brian Topp, one of the architects of NDP's December 2008 agreement to serve as junior partner in a Liberal-led coalition committed to "fiscal responsibility," corporate tax cuts and waging war in Afghanistan. When former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair emerged as the winner, the CEP quickly rallied to his side.

Both the CAW and CEP have strongly supported the NDP's propping-up of the current Ontario Liberal government, which has imposed massive social spending cuts and imposed wage cuts and other concessions on teachers by legislative fiat.

Few workers will be fooled by the high-flown rhetoric to be dispensed from the assembled bureaucrats on the podium at this weekend's convention. There have been too many betrayals, too many rotten deals in a trade union movement that acts as the junior partner of the corporations and a police force for management on the shop floor. Only by breaking politically and organizationally from the unions and NDP and building new organs of struggle—above all a mass workers party committed to resolving the capitalist crisis at the expense of big business through the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life—will it be possible for working people to answer and defeat the ruling elite's social counterrevolution.



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