

Canadian Labour Congress replaces top bureaucrat with his “number two”

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Hassan Yussuff, the secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress and right-hand man to CLC president Ken Georgetti for over a decade, unseated his boss in the presidential election of the national union umbrella organization held in Montreal May 8. It was the first time in the history of the CLC that an incumbent president had been defeated in a vote at a national convention.

Yussuff, a career union bureaucrat in his own right, received 2,318 votes whilst Georgetti won the support of 2,278 delegates. A third candidate, Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) national negotiator, Hassan Hussein, a former Ontario leader of the Communist Party who quit the Stalinist organization in 2003 to more aggressively pursue his career in the union bureaucracy, withdrew from the election at the eleventh hour to throw his support behind Yussuff.

In addition, Yussuff’s “more democracy, grassroots renewal” slate won all three other executive posts up for balloting. Fewer than half the delegates, however, stayed to cast votes for those positions, preferring instead to retire to the bars and bistros of downtown Montreal for apparently more important diversions.

Immediately following his victory, Yussuff received congratulatory messages from Justin Trudeau, leader of the big business Liberal party, Employment Minister Jason Kenney representing the right-wing government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and New Democratic Party (NDP) labour critic Alexandre Boulerice.

In generations past, a race between contending bureaucrats for the leadership of Canada’s central labour body would have garnered considerable press attention as the editorial boards of the nation’s newspapers and broadcast outlets closely scanned the organization for any sign of militancy within the labour movement. But those days are long gone. Fully aware that there were no significant differences between Georgetti and his competitors, the mainstream press restricted their

coverage of the convention to single cursory articles announcing the election results and briefly profiling the winning candidate. The nightly television news round-ups had even less interest, confining the undertakings at the convention to brief sound-bites, if indeed they mentioned the convention at all.

While masquerading as an opponent of the sitting president, Yussuff, in fact, had been repeatedly elected to the CLC executive since 1999 on the same slate as Georgetti. During that time, they jointly presided over a precipitous decline in union membership while suppressing any challenge by the working class to the ever-widening big business offensive on jobs, public services and worker rights. Their joint tenure oversaw—without opposition save for a few publicity stunts and feel-good television ads—the decimation of vast swathes of industry, the continued erosion of wages, pensions and contractual benefits, the massive redistribution of wealth to a tiny minority, the virtual outlawing of the right-to-strike by the Harper government and the implementation of austerity budgets by the federal and provincial governments of every political stripe.

Over the past decade, the Georgetti-Yussuff slate fully supported the headlong turn to the right of the social-democratic NDP, including its propping up of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin’s big business minority government in Ottawa, the 2008 (failed) national coalition deal between the NDP and the Liberals, and the Ontario NDP’s role as junior partners of the austerity provincial Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne.

In an interview with the *Montreal Gazette*, Yussuff tried to explain away his own culpability. “I’ve said very candidly that we have been sitting on our hands for too long,” he admitted by way of an appeal for rehabilitation. Indeed, what lay behind Yussuff’s belated “opposition” to Georgetti—the Secretary-Treasurer only announced his

candidacy a few weeks before the election—was fear of the consequences of the massive erosion of the union officialdom’s credibility. Much of the rank-and-file recognizes that the trade unions that purport to represent them are little more than auxiliary policemen for the companies within the workplace.

For the CLC, this is a matter of some urgency. The dues-paying base that underwrites the bureaucracy’s privileges has steadily shrunk over the past twenty years. A new face in the president’s chair, so concluded a slim majority of the assembled union officialdom, could be used to misdirect burgeoning worker disillusionment.

In the run-up to the convention, the political representatives of the pseudo-left fell over themselves to endorse the candidacy of the former Stalinist *cum* rising union bureaucrat, Hassan Hussein. Their spokespeople are all too aware of the increasing disgust of hundreds of thousands of union members with a union apparatus that holds its membership in thrall to the corporations.

Thus, for example, in seeking to re-harness working people to the union bureaucracy by way of Hussein, postal union official Cindy Miller writes in *New Socialist* and *Socialist Project* that the labour movement “is stalled, virtually paralyzed and rapidly dissolving as a new generation of workers wonders ‘why bother?’” The misnamed International Socialists, had similarly plumped for Hussein, breathlessly asserting that his “decision to run for president of the CLC has produced a lot of positive debate and discussion about the direction the labour movement needs to go, and the kind of leadership required to achieve that...a victory for a left voice will give confidence to activists across the country.”

In the end, Hussein, whose support included “food sovereigntists, environmentalists, students and human rights activists” and whose platitudes on “grassroots participation” were similar to Yussuff’s, withdrew from the close race on the convention floor and threw his thin layer of support to Yussuff, thereby ensuring the secretary-treasurer’s narrow victory.

The proceedings at the CLC convention underscore the deepening crisis of this moribund and bureaucratic organization and its isolation and alienation from the broad masses of working people. The election of the long-time right-hand man of Georgetti as the “opposition” candidate only further exposes the utter cynicism of the union officialdom. For decades, the CLC has been engaged in negotiating the lowering of wages and benefits, the elimination of jobs, and the intensification of the exploitation of its members. A generation of workers

has spent its entire work-life without experiencing a strike—or only losing strikes. Yet the middle-class “left” is determined to keep the working class organizationally imprisoned in the pro-capitalist trade unions and politically subordinated to the union bureaucracy and the NDP—now fittingly led by the ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair.

The collapse of the CLC is part of a broader, global phenomenon. All over the world, trade unions have undergone a similar degeneration. The globalization of production of the past three decades was the death-knell for all labor organizations based on a nationalist perspective. Where once the unions restricted workers to pressuring employers and capitalist governments for higher wages and piece-meal reforms, now they demand workers make wage and benefit concessions to attract investment and ensure corporate “competitiveness”.

The deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression is creating the conditions for a new period of class struggle. The Canadian working class needs to tear itself free of the putrid corpse of the CLC and build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the workers and completely independent and opposed to the old union apparatus. The building of these new organizations must be linked to a new political strategy—a break with the parties of big business and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class, to fight for workers’ power and socialism.



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