

Unifor touts collaboration with big business Liberals after blocking strike at GM Canada

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23 September 2016

Following the announcement of Unifor's phony tentative agreement early Tuesday with General Motors Canada, union head Jerry Dias has boasted about the support received from the federal and Ontario provincial Liberal governments.

The agreement, the terms of which remain entirely concealed and may still not be finalized, was aimed above all at blocking strike action by 4,000 GM workers at the company's Oshawa, St. Catharines and Woodstock facilities. Although Dias enthused over investment commitments from GM, there is no confirmation about the products that will be allocated to the Oshawa plant, where the union has accepted the destruction of close to 800 full-time jobs with the closure of the consolidated line in 2017.

Unifor has also acceded to a massive attack on workers' pension rights, with new hires starting on a defined contribution scheme, and done nothing to overturn the hated two-tier wage system. Not only is this pattern expected to be followed at Ford and Fiat Chrysler, but right-wing publications like the *National Post* are now urging that defined benefit pension plans be eliminated throughout the public sector.

Dias touts this rotten deal, which he hopes to ram down the throats of workers with promises of a signing bonus and retirement packages for older workers, for bringing "investment" to Canada. Speaking like a cheap labour contractor, he hailed GM's facilities for their profitability at his Tuesday press conference.

The Ontario Liberals responded swiftly. Premier Kathleen Wynne welcomed the tentative agreement and made clear the government would be involved, i.e., by providing cash grants and other incentives to boost corporate profits at GM. "We're very much involved and I'm thrilled that there's a tentative agreement," Wynne said.

"I look forward to the vote on Sunday and I'm very, very pleased that we see a bright future for the auto industry in Oshawa and across the province."

The federal government has remained tight-lipped on its role, but it has leaked plans to convert a low-interest loan scheme available to the automakers into a grant program that will see millions in public money handed to the corporate giants.

The mutual backslapping between Unifor and the Liberals over the latest sell-out deal must be taken as a warning by

workers. It comes just weeks after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who has vastly expanded Canada's involvement in US-led wars around the world and laid the groundwork for a massive assault on the working class with his appointment of a team of economic "advisers" to draw up plans to improve "innovation," received a hero's welcome at Unifor's national convention.

Unifor, and the union bureaucracy more broadly, has embraced the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government over the past two decades in a close working relationship that has been aimed at systematically suppressing the class struggle, facilitating the decimation of public services and an assault on wages and working conditions.

Following the last major upsurge of the working class in Ontario, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets to oppose the "Common Sense Revolution" of Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris—a Thatcher-inspired program that launched attacks on welfare and social spending as well as sweeping tax cuts for big business and the rich—the unions worked tirelessly to demobilize the workers, including by sabotaging a militant teachers' strike in the fall of 1997 that was winning mass support. Terrified at the prospect of the anti-Tory upsurge getting out of control and undermining its privileged position, the bureaucracy made a deliberate turn to deepen relations with the Ontario Liberals through the launching of the Ontario Working Families Coalition.

With millions in union funding, Liberal leader Dalton McGinty was elected premier in 2003, heading an administration that maintained the key tenets of Harris' "Common Sense Revolution." Over the next dozen years, the Ontario Liberals slashed social spending, privatized public utilities like Hydro One, outlawed teachers' strikes and cut taxes for big business and the wealthy.

The union's newfound alliance with the Liberals was consummated precisely at the point when the federal Liberals were imposing the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history under the governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin.

The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), Unifor's predecessor, used its close ties to the Liberals to enforce brutal attacks on autoworkers as part of the bailout organized by the provincial

Liberals and federal Conservative governments during the global financial crisis of 2008. The principal goal of the bailout was to make GM, Ford and Chrysler profitable for the wealthy elite by overturning gains won in bitter struggles by autoworkers over decades.

The CAW reopened concessions contracts signed in 2008 and imposed wage and benefit cuts amounting to \$19 per worker, including wage and cost of living freezes, health and insurance premium hikes, the relinquishing of a week's holiday and the acceptance of a speed-up.

The CAW continued its pro-corporate assault in the 2012 round of bargaining, cutting new hire wages by 20 percent, lengthening the period of time workers required to reach full seniority from six to 10 years, and introducing the hybrid pension scheme for new hires which, as now can be clearly seen, served as the first step in the all-out abolition of guaranteed pensions for retiring autoworkers.

Unifor and the rest of the union top brass intensified their efforts to give the right-wing, big business Liberals a "progressive" face. In 2014, they backed the reelection of the provincial Liberal government committed to further social spending cuts and privatizations on the basis that it was necessary to block the coming to power of Progressive Conservative Tim Hudak.

The 2014 campaign served as a template for the "Anybody but Harper" initiative spearheaded by Unifor in 2015, which urged Canadians to vote for the Trudeau Liberals as the best means of putting an end to close to a decade of rule by Stephen Harper's Conservatives.

Having hailed Trudeau's election victory as a triumph, the unions have remained completely silent on the Liberal government's war plans, including the deployment of 450 troops to Eastern Europe, hundreds to the Middle East and 600 to Africa—missions which will be paid for by imposing deep attacks on public services at home.

The integration of Unifor and the union bureaucracy as a whole into corporate management and the state takes place in the context of deepening class tensions. Less than a month prior to Unifor's blocking of a strike by GM workers, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers imposed a similar betrayal at Canada Post. Under conditions where the 50,000-strong union membership voted overwhelmingly for strike action to win back concessions given up in one contract after another, the CUPW leadership encouraged the most fatal illusions in the big business Liberals and their public consultation on Canada Post and argued that a strike had to be avoided at all costs to allow the consultation to proceed. In the event, the consultation committee solidarized itself entirely with the demands of Canada Post management for further attacks on workers and the ending of home delivery services.

Unifor's reactionary record in enforcing management's demands against autoworkers over decades and cementing ties with the big business Liberals is the product of its nationalist

and pro-capitalist orientation. Ever since the CAW split with the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1985, it has worked with the UAW and auto bosses to systematically stoke divisions between working people on both sides of the border, pitting US, Canadian and Mexican autoworkers in a race to the bottom. In the name of "saving Canadian jobs," it has enforced round after round of pay cuts and other concessions.

As the latest tentative agreement only underscores, the consequences of this perspective, while consolidating the privileges of a tiny, self-satisfied elite in the union bureaucracy, has been devastating for tens of thousands of autoworkers and their families. Since 2000, employment in Canada's auto sector has been halved, long-standing protections have been gutted and real wages slashed.

GM workers should reject the sell-out deal being presented by Unifor for ratification on Sunday. But defeating the calls for more concessions and overturning the givebacks of the past two decades requires the adoption of a new political strategy and the formation of rank-and-file action committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats.

This struggle must be guided by a new political perspective, one which rejects the nationalist and pro-corporatist poison peddled by Unifor and adopts a socialist and internationalist program to unite autoworkers with their brothers and sisters throughout North America and internationally. As the Socialist Equality Party argued in its statement to autoworkers on the current contract dispute, "To defeat big business, workers need their own party—not a sham 'labour party' like the pro-capitalist NDP—but a socialist party that has as its aim the establishment of a workers' government. Such a government would place basic industry and the banks under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class so as to guarantee for all secure and well-paying jobs, quality healthcare, education, a comfortable retirement, and a future for the next generation free from poverty and war."



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