

Unifor disaffiliates from Canadian Labour Congress in spat over “raiding”

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Unifor, Canada’s largest private sector union, announced last month its immediate disaffiliation from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)—the national umbrella group that represents and regulates jurisdictional disputes among its 65 affiliated national and “international” (Canada-US) trade unions.

Unifor’s action comes as a result of a long-brewing dispute in the labour bureaucracy around the CLC’s process for adjudicating disputes over the recruitment of workers in one union by another union, also known as “raiding.” Rules have long been in place to regulate and limit union-representation spats, for fear the competition among unions to expand their dues-paying financial base at the expense of others would weaken and discredit the union bureaucracy as a whole. In its previous incarnation as the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), Unifor split from the CLC once before—in 2001—after a raid on the Service Employees International Union.

None of the rival right-wing factions involved in the current squabble represents the interests of the working class. Nor do they have any principled differences. Rather the dispute revolves around access to financial largesse in the form of union dues, under conditions where the percentage of private sector workers represented by a union has fallen to just 15 percent, half of what it was in the 1980s.

Employing demagogic Canadian nationalist appeals, Unifor—which has led the way in undermining workers’ wages and living standards in auto and other industries over the past three decades, and worked tirelessly to subordinate workers to the big business Liberal Party—is seeking to expand its bureaucratic apparatus at the expense of US-based unions. Critics of Unifor’s actions, who have appealed for “unity” within the CLC, are motivated above all by the fear that the dispute will further discredit the union bureaucracy in the eyes of working people and undermine the unions’ tepid and, with rare exceptions, unsuccessful attempts to “organize” low-wage and temporary workers.

With union membership in the private sector diminishing and workers increasingly reluctant to join organizations that they see as impotent if not openly siding with management in imposing concessions contracts, such jurisdictional disputes assume ever more the character of vicious bureaucratic infighting and dues-grubbing.

Earlier this month, a faction within Unite HERE Local 75, a union that organizes 8,000 low-paid hotel and restaurant workers in the Greater Toronto Area, made public its intention to disaffiliate from the North America-wide Unite HERE International and join Unifor. Unifor then began to sign up disaffected Unite HERE members. Due to ongoing strife within Local 75’s executive that involved charges of undemocratic behaviour, dysfunction and racism, the Local had earlier been placed under a voluntary trusteeship controlled by the International head office in New York City. That has since been transformed into an imposed trusteeship that has sidelined the Unifor supporters.

The events now unfolding at Unite HERE echo an abortive raid by Unifor last year to supplant Local 113 of the Washington-based international Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) as the bargaining representative for ten thousand Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers.

In that dispute, the ATU charged that Local 113 President Bob Kinnear had colluded with Unifor to disaffiliate his local from the ATU and join up with Unifor, entirely behind the backs of the members he purported to represent. Just prior to ATU international headquarters placing Local 113 under trusteeship, Kinnear, with clandestine backing and assurances from Unifor, approached the CLC, to initiate the disaffiliation process. In the end, despite equivocation from CLC President Hassan Yussuff, himself a Unifor member, the move to disaffiliate failed and Kinnear had to resign.

Unifor President Jerry Dias announced January 16 that his union is pulling out of the CLC, so as to force changes in the way it manages union representation disputes. In so doing, he played the retrograde nationalist card that has been the hallmark of Unifor and its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers since the union split from the United Auto Workers in 1985. Dias complained of “US based unions trampling on the rights of workers and their democratic right to choose their own representation or to express dissent.”

The invocation of “democratic rights” by Dias would be laughable if it were not so egregious. Unifor has been first among equals in the union movement in silencing and sidelining dissident voices, denouncing workers daring to oppose sellout agreements and shutting down strike action.

Autoworkers will remember well Dias' arrogant performance during the 2016 contract negotiations at the Canadian operations of Ford, GM and Fiat-Chrysler. Dias denounced rank-and-file opponents of his sellout deals from the podiums of the ratification meetings, left the halls before questions from the floor had been completed, and refused to allow members to even see the phony "framework agreements" before they voted.

Last fall's month-long strike at GM's CAMI plant, the first in over 20 years at a Detroit Three plant in Canada, provided an object lesson in Unifor's contempt for the interests of the workers it claims to represent. Despite widespread demands for an end to the hated two-tier wage system and a substantial wage hike after years of concessions, Unifor subordinated the entire struggle to its rightwing maneuvers with the Liberal government, advancing as its central demand the call for CAMI to be designated the lead manufacturing plant for the hot-selling Equinox. This nationalist policy had the effect of cutting off Canadian workers from their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, and was part of Unifor's reactionary alliance with Trudeau and US President Donald Trump to secure a "renegotiated" North American Free Trade Agreement, under which Unifor would work with the automakers to reorganize the auto industry at the expense of Mexican workers.

Unifor's nationalist-corporatist strategy left CAMI workers entirely defenceless when GM threatened to close down the Ingersoll, Ontario plant and shift all production to Mexico. In response, Unifor swiftly capitulated to GM's demands and shut the strike down.

Unifor's anti-working class record is just one example of the transformation of the union bureaucracy over the past three decades, in Canada as well as internationally, into veritable arms of big business and the state in imposing job and wage cuts and suppressing the class struggle.

The unions have established the closest cooperation with major corporations and the state through co-management and tri-partite committees. CLC President Yussuff has boasted of his unprecedented access to the Trudeau Liberal government, which is implementing a 70 percent hike in military spending over the next decade to fund new wars around the world in the interests of Canadian imperialism, while waging an assault on democratic and social rights at home. Yussuff also sits alongside former federal Tory leader Rona Ambrose and top auto-parts CEO Linda Hasenfratz on the Liberal government's NAFTA advisory council.

Millions of dollars, and many well-paid careers, are at stake in the current inter-union dispute, giving it an especially venomous character.

Former Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President and perennial failed New Democratic Party candidate Sid Ryan, himself pushed out of his position in 2015 by a coalition of unions led by Unifor, was quick to post a statement calling for the immediate resignation of all Unifor-sponsored executives in the CLC, provincial labour federations and local trade union

councils. The constitutions of these organizations stipulate that only those who are members of unions affiliated to the CLC can hold office.

CLC President Yussuff and OFL President Chris Buckley—along with many others—are thus no longer eligible to hold office.

Brandishing their own anti-democratic credentials, Yussuff, Buckley and others have so far side-stepped this constitutional stipulation, as Unifor works back-channels to attain their "sponsorship" by another union still affiliated with the CLC—even though no such loophole exists in the CLC constitution.

The CLC leadership has scheduled a February 5th "emergency meeting" of all member unions to discuss the debacle.

The current dispute between the CLC and Unifor has also brought to the surface a long-brewing tactical issue that has divided many of Canada's unions for the past two decades. While many CLC affiliates have continued full-throated support for the country's traditional social-democratic party—the pro-war, pro-austerity New Democratic Party—and called on their members to vote for the NDP in provincial and federal elections, Unifor as well as other unions and provincial federations have embraced "strategic voting," thereby promoting the big business Liberal Party as a supposed "progressive alternative" to the Conservatives.

However, as has been long demonstrated, a union-backed government, whatever its exact composition—whether formed exclusively by the Liberals or NDP, or involving a formal coalition or informal alliance between them—is an instrument of big business for attacking the working class.

Working people can only advance their independent class interests by rejecting the entire rotten union apparatus and establishing new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank-and-file. These action committees must be guided by intransigent opposition to the unions' nationalist outlook, and take up the fight to unite workers across Canada with working people around the world on the basis of a socialist program.



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