

Ontario Liberals give boost to Unifor union raiding strategy

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Buried deep in the pre-election budget Ontario's Liberal government tabled last month was a provision that is a transparent sop to the Unifor bureaucracy—a regulatory change meant to boost Unifor's strategy of augmenting its due base by “raiding” members from other unions.

The new provision is yet another illustration of the intimate ties between the big business Liberals and Unifor. Canada's largest industrial union, Unifor has led the way over the past two decades in promoting the Liberals as a “progressive” force, even as they have imposed austerity, illegalized strikes, privatized infrastructure and, at the federal level, pursued rearmament and war.

The government boost to Unifor comes in the wake of its disaffiliation from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) this past January in a sordid dues-grubbing dispute amongst rival union apparatuses.

The new regulation from Kathleen Wynne and her Ontario Liberal government stipulates that any attempt by a parent union to place one of its locals into trusteeship and thereby assert centralized control of all local assets and decision-making processes is no longer strictly an internal trade union matter. Prior to taking effect, any trusteeship must now be approved by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB).

Unifor's leadership has celebrated this change, hailing the granting of additional powers to the OLRB, a state body tasked with regulating and suppressing the class struggle on behalf of big business. “Now the only way workers can be put into trusteeship is for a bona fide reason,” crowed Unifor President Jerry Dias. “It can't be used to quell dissent or to control. I give the Liberals full credit. They did what the labour movement didn't do.”

Unifor has twice been thwarted in recent attempts to take-over the memberships of fellow unions. First, through a backroom deal with Amalgamated Transit

Union (ATU) Local 113 President Bob Kinnear, Unifor tried to gain control of the local that represents ten thousand Toronto Transit Commission workers. Then earlier this year it tried to capture Unite HERE Local 75, which is the collective bargaining agent for some 9,000 low-paid hotel and restaurant workers in Toronto.

After the CLC belatedly moved to block the raid on the ATU and subsequently differed with Unifor on how to interpret its rules governing workers switching unions, Dias, without consulting his own membership, pulled Unifor out of the CLC and launched a campaign to sign up Toronto hotel workers.

In both instances, the parent unions of the targeted locals—international unions with headquarters in the United States—placed the Toronto locals under trusteeships to prevent Unifor from poaching their members.

Dias and large sections of the union bureaucracy in Ontario are pulling out all the stops in support of Kathleen Wynne's big business Liberal government ahead of June's provincial election. They are advancing the spurious argument that workers can stop the far-right, anti-worker policies advocated by Progressive Conservative leader Doug Ford by once again returning the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals to power.

Unifor applauded the bogus promises contained in Wynne's pre-election budget, claiming they “show continued momentum towards social justice.” Dias asserted, “This budget sets the baseline for the upcoming election. Ontarians need strong public services and investments to address inequality, not the right-wing, backward budget cuts that the Conservatives are threatening.”

As the WSWS commented, “Who does Dias think he is kidding? His claim that the Liberals can secure ‘strong public services’ is made of a party that has slashed spending on health care, education, and social provisions

to the bone, outlawed strikes and job actions by teachers and other sections of workers, and connived with Unifor to impose sweeping concessions on autoworkers, including wage and benefit cuts of more than C\$20 per hour as part of the 2009 industry ‘bailout.’”

None of the rival bureaucratic factions involved in the ATU and Unite-HERE disputes with Unifor represent the interests of the working class. Nor do they have any principled differences. All the unions involved are known for foisting concessionary contracts on their memberships. Unifor has rammed through concession after concession on the tens of thousands of workers in the auto industry, including the imposition of two-tier wages, wage freezes, and the gutting of benefits.

For its part, the CLC is a right-wing, pro-corporate organization that for decades has systematically suppressed the class struggle. In the lead-up to the 2015 federal election, the CLC played a central role in the “Anybody but Harper campaign” that saw the unions urge voters to back Justin Trudeau’s Liberals in name of removing the Conservatives. The CLC was heavily involved in the Canadian Peoples’ Social Forum in August 2014, which helped lay the groundwork for the subsequent pro-Liberal “strategic voting drive.” Then, within days of Trudeau becoming Prime Minister, 100 top CLC officials met with him behind closed doors to pledge their collaboration in implementing the Liberal government’s anti-worker, pro-war agenda.

The CLC bureaucracy and many of its affiliates also maintain close ties to the pro-austerity New Democratic Party (NDP), which has come into headlong conflict with the working class whenever and wherever it has formed the provincial government.

The ATU dispute involved Unifor colluding with Kinnear to bring the local under its control entirely behind the backs of its members; whilst the Unite HERE dispute involves a year-long seedy tale encompassing vicious factionalism, charges of racism, victimizations and violations of democratic practice. The squabbles ultimately revolve around access to financial largesse in the form of union dues, under conditions where nationally the percentage of private sector workers represented by a union has fallen to just 15 percent, half of what it was in the 1980s.

In the ongoing conflict in Toronto’s hotel industry, Unifor has managed to wrest 900 workers from 5 of the 24 hotels organized by Unite HERE.

Unifor and its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have led the way among Canada’s trade unions in

calling on their members to support Liberal candidates in most federal and provincial constituencies during election cycles. Dias boasts of his access the federal Liberal cabinet ministers and is whipping up Canadian nationalism to divide Canadian workers from workers in the US and Mexico during the ongoing renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The support extended to this right-wing bourgeois party by Unifor and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole demonstrates the organic hostility of these organizations to any mobilization by the working class to boost wages, secure better working conditions and otherwise defend its interests.

The invocation of democratic control by Dias would be laughable if it were not so egregious. So outrageous was Dias’ executive fiat pulling Unifor out of the CLC that rank-and-file workers at four large Unifor locals have gone on record to oppose disaffiliation.

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.

Dias has sought to buttress his attempt to “grow” Unifor by courting lower-level bureaucrats in other organizations by wrapping himself in the Canadian flag and attacking US-based unions for denying Canadian workers their rights. 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’ ability to suppress working class struggles whenever they break out.

The granting of additional powers to the Ontario Labour Relations Board represents no advance for workers. It is a state agency used to police the class struggle. Earlier this month, it connived with York University management to force 3,000 striking contract faculty and teaching assistants to vote on a rotten concessions contract that the union bargaining committee had deemed unacceptable. In November 2017, the OLRB played a central role in facilitating the Liberals’ outlawing of a strike by 12,000 college teachers.



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