

# Unifor convention gives centre-stage to Trudeau, Freeland and the Liberal re-election campaign

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Unifor's triennial convention, held in Quebec City this past week, had more the character of an extended Liberal Party of Canada election campaign rally than a trade union gathering. Both Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland were invited to deliver keynote speeches, as Unifor's top brass make clear they will mobilize the resources of Canada's biggest industrial union to keep the big business, pro-austerity and pro-war Liberals in power.

After Unifor President Jerry Dias delivered an opening address full of "militant" bluster and denunciations of anti-worker measures adopted by various Conservative governments, he gave Trudeau a glowing introduction. The Prime Minister, who has ordered a 70 percent hike in military spending, criminalized a strike by 50,000 postal workers, and aided Trump's crackdown on refugees was hailed by Dias as someone who "listens and gives respect to unions."

The Unifor president praised the Liberal government for aligning its foreign policy even more closely with Trump by agreeing to a renegotiated NAFTA that further integrates Canadian imperialism into a US-led protectionist trade bloc aimed at confronting its economic and strategic rivals, above all China. In this, Dias played a not insignificant role, serving as a semi-official adviser to Trudeau during the trade talks.

Trudeau's remarks were no less hypocritical and demagogic. He asserted his government had spent four years "putting workers first," and vowed the Liberals' "partnership" with Unifor will continue. "This is only the beginning," Trudeau declared, "Together, we will go much further."

In an interview with *Maclean's* conducted during the convention, Dias bluntly laid out his union's plans to reprise their and the Canadian Labour Congress' 2015 "Anybody but Harper" campaign, which amounted to a get-out-the-vote push for Trudeau and his Liberals. "Our politics as a union are pretty straightforward," Dias told *Maclean's*, "It's anybody but Conservative."

Dias went on to sing the praises of the Liberals, long the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government. The Trudeau government has implemented "some incredibly progressive stuff," he claimed. "[I]t's the first and only government that I know globally that invited the labour movement to play an incredibly active role during the renegotiations of NAFTA. I spent a lot of time with Chrystia on that file," he added, referring to the Liberal government's principal war-hawk by her first name.

Dias also hailed Kathleen Wynne, who headed an Ontario Liberal government that imposed savage austerity and outlawed job action by teachers and other workers until it was trounced at the polls in June

2018. Unifor's president called Wynne "one of the most progressive leaders we've ever had in this country."

Dias' fulsome praise for the Liberals is no idiosyncrasy. It typifies the evolution of the pro-capitalist trade unions the world over. Incapable of mounting any progressive response to globalization, they have renounced any association with class struggle, integrated themselves ever more completely with corporate management and the capitalist state, and systematically suppressed worker resistance, while promoting the most repugnant forms of nationalism.

In their close ties to Trudeau and his Liberals, Dias and the phalanx of six-figure salaried Unifor bureaucrats are only "first among equals" within the ranks of the trade union bureaucracy.

In November 2015, more than a 100 union and labour federation heads met with Trudeau to celebrate his election victory and promise their loyal collaboration with the new government. When Ottawa confronted Trump's steel and aluminum tariffs, the United Steelworkers spearheaded the Canadian ruling elite's push, as the *Globe and Mail* put it, to get "behind Trump's walls." It championed Trudeau's counter-tariffs and amplified his and Freeland's appeals for Washington to recognize the "contribution" Canadian-made steel and aluminum make to building US fighter jets, tanks, and other highly-powered weaponry.

Earlier this summer Trudeau was a guest of honour at the Canadian Teachers Federation convention.

That being said, Unifor's brazen endorsement for the Liberals marks a significant shift to the right by Canada's largest private sector union. Whereas Canada's unions traditionally sought to exert their political influence, at least during election campaigns, through the New Democratic Party (NDP), Unifor has increasingly sidelined the social democrats so as to unabashedly "partner" with the Liberals.

Unifor conspicuously kept NDP leader Jagmeet Singh and all other federal NDP politicians off the convention platform. The Unifor bureaucrats have apparently concluded—given the NDP's own rapid march right—that there are more perks to be had from backing the original servant of corporate Canada's interests than a pale imitation.

**Dias hails Unifor's diversionary and chauvinist "Save Oshawa GM" campaign**

Unifor's right-wing political agenda goes hand-in-hand with the

corporatist “partnership” it has forged with the Detroit Three and the corporate giants that dominate the aviation, forestry, and other industries, helping to ensure “corporate competitiveness”—i.e. lavish investor profits—through concessions, job cuts and speed-up.

Acutely aware of the mounting anger against the union bureaucracy that this is producing among rank-and-file workers, Dias desperately sought to conceal Unifor’s reactionary role in his keynote address behind a blast of bombast.

Like a cheap street magician, Dias conjured up great victories from the bitter defeats suffered by rank-and-file Unifor members. In Gander, Newfoundland, 30 workers locked-out by DJ Composites and left to stand by themselves on the picket-line for two years were ultimately forced to accept the company’s final offer by a provincial arbitrator. But Dias proclaimed this a victory because Unifor had produced a video that “named and shamed” a few scabs.

Turning to Oshawa, where the GM Assembly plant is set to close this autumn, permanently eliminating the jobs of at least 5,000 production and Oshawa-area auto parts workers, Dias hailed Unifor’s “Save GM Oshawa” campaign. This campaign consisted of suppressing any independent worker initiative, including a number of sit-down protests that stopped production, futile appeals to GM and the incitement of Canadian nationalism and anti-Mexican chauvinism. At a series of rallies, Unifor deployed racist anti-Mexican stereotypes, such as a woman dressed in a sombrero, to divide autoworkers along national lines and block a common fight by North American autoworkers against all concessions and jobs cuts.

When workers at two Oshawa-area GM feeder plants, Syncreon and CEVA Logistics, rebelled against the miserable severance packages being offered them by launching a wildcat strike earlier this month, Unifor rushed to shut the walkout down, then issued an order to all its local parts-plant units to stay on the job.

The imminent GM Oshawa plant closure, along with the decades of concession contracts and massive job losses, reveal the utter failure of the nationalist strategy pursued by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union. The CAW bureaucrats split from the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1986 hoping that they could cut separate deals with GM, Ford and Chrysler based on the lower labour costs the automakers enjoyed in Canada due to the cheaper Canadian dollar and the government-funded health system.

This “strategy” collapsed as the UAW imposed deep wage cuts on US autoworkers, and the Detroit-based automakers expanded to Mexico for even cheaper labour. The auto bosses, with the unions’ unyielding support, were then able to use these nationalist divisions to whip-saw jobs and wages across borders in a never-ending race to the bottom. In the process, Unifor, like the entire trade union movement, has been transformed into nothing more than a junior partner of the corporations.

### **Silence on US autoworker contract fight**

In his entire 80-minute speech, Dias made not a single mention of the impending contract fight of the over 150,000 Detroit Three autoworkers in the United States, even though their contracts will set the benchmark for the terms and conditions of Canadian autoworkers when their contracts are renegotiated in 2020. Nor did he mention the ever-expanding UAW corruption scandal, which has implicated a host

of senior union officials.

A fighting mood is rapidly taking hold among American autoworkers. But, the UAW, which has forced through one concessions contract after another for three decades, is plotting to impose yet another concessions-laden contract, and will seek to ruthlessly suppress rank-and-file opposition.

Dias and Unifor are preparing to aid and abet this betrayal, by quarantining Canadian workers from their US brothers and sisters.

The logic of Unifor’s anti-working class, nationalist-corporatist course is its subordination to the most rapacious interests of Canadian imperialism. Dias and the other Unifor bureaucrats assembled in Quebec City applauded Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland as she declared in her speech that Canada must “stand up for liberal democratic values” against “authoritarian regimes” that are “trying to undermine our democracy through propaganda and spying.”

While Freeland didn’t mention them by name, her tirade against “authoritarian regimes” was aimed against Russia and China, whom she identified in her 2017 speech introducing Canada’s new National Defence Policy as the greatest threats to Canada’s “national interests.” In that 2017 speech, Freeland motivated the government’s plan to raise military spending by more than 70 percent to \$32.7 billion by 2026; praised US imperialism’s “outsized role” in defending “the liberal democratic order” following World War II; and said Canada must now shoulder more of the burden in upholding North American global imperialist dominance.

This policy has guided the Trudeau government as it has expanded Canadian military deployments around the world. Following in Stephen Harper’s footsteps, the Liberal government has deepened Ottawa’s military-strategic partnership with US imperialism, including by deploying troops to the Middle East and Eastern Europe and warships to the South China Sea. In Venezuela, Canada has served as a key ally in Washington’s aggressive regime change operation, with Freeland leading the so-called Lima Group in providing a phony “democratic” cover for imperialist aggression and US preparations to invade the country with the world’s largest oil reserves.



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