

# Canadian unions cement anti-worker corporatist alliance with government and big business

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The trade union bureaucracy has seized on the unprecedented health and socio-economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic to deepen its already close partnership with the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government and powerful sections of Canada's corporate elite.

The unions, like their close allies in the New Democratic Party (NDP), have supported the massive bailout of the banks, other investors, and big business orchestrated by the Trudeau government and the Bank of Canada, while helping the ruling elite force workers who have lost their jobs onto ration-style temporary relief. Now, with the ruling class mounting a "back-to-work" campaign, seeking to reopen non-essential business and services in the midst of a raging pandemic, the unions are doing everything in their power to suppress worker resistance to returning to unsafe workplaces.

The unions' corporatist anti-worker alliance with big business was epitomized by a joint statement from Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff and Canadian Chamber of Commerce (CCC) head Perrin Beatty published in Monday's *Hill Times*. Entitled "Canada needs a national task force on how best to reboot the economy," it argued that a tripartite alliance between government, big business, and the unions is a critical mechanism for intensifying the exploitation of the working class and strengthening Canadian imperialism's global position amid the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression.

This statement is the outcome of weeks of close cooperation between the trade unions, the CCC and other leading business lobby groups. In early March, as COVID-19 cases surged in North America and stock markets suffered their biggest ever losses, Yussuff called for a "collaborative front" between employers and the unions. Behind the scenes, the CLC, Unifor, the Quebec Federation of Labour and the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) held consultations with the government, Beatty and other business representatives on how to salvage Canadian big business and prevent the economic collapse from sparking massive social unrest.

This resulted in over \$650 billion being funnelled into the banks and big business so as to rescue the fortunes of the rich and super-rich. Workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work due to the pandemic, meanwhile, are being provided just \$2,000 per month through the temporary Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

Underscoring their role as the labour lieutenants of capital, the unions and NDP have sought to cover up the ruthless, naked class character of the government's response to the economic collapse triggered by the pandemic. About the government's bailout of the financial elite and on a scale that dwarfs even that engineered by the Harper Conservative government amid the 2008 global financial crisis, the unions and social-democratic NDP politicians have breathed not a word, helping to conceal the ruling class's looting of the treasury. On the other hand, they have

heaped praise on the CERB and the no strings-attached wage subsidy for employers and invoked them to laud the "progressive" Liberal government and its readiness to seek "common ground."

A March 18 statement from the CLC, for example, enthused that the unions were "pleased" with the government's measures "to help Canadian families." The statement continued, "This financial aid package will help deliver money directly to the workers who need it most" (see: "Canada's trade unions back Liberal coronavirus plan to bail out big business, place workers on rations").

The close to two months since have provided a devastating verdict on these demagogic and complacent claims. The corporate elite has seized on the unlimited government largesse extended it to initiate a massive assault on the working class through the imposition of lay-offs and stepped-up exploitation. The latest Statistics Canada figures show that 1.9 million workers lost their jobs in April, including over 600,000 in manufacturing and construction. Meanwhile, food bank use has skyrocketed as families struggle to make ends meet. Leading politicians now regularly threaten the withdrawal of the meagre CERB to bully workers on the verge of financial ruin back to work.

However, none of this interests the unions and their corporate allies. Once the public purse had been successfully raided, they switched gears to mounting a reckless "back-to-work" drive. Beginning in mid-April and culminating in this week's *Hill Times* statement from Yussuff and Beatty, the union bureaucracy released a series of statements and documents, many of them co-authored with big business representatives, aimed at justifying and providing political cover for forcing workers to return to work.

Taken together, these statements systematically downplayed the risk posed by the pandemic, accepted without question the right of big business to risk workers' lives for corporate profits, and advanced a reactionary Canadian nationalist narrative to claim that "we're all in this together."

## The April 15 joint statement: the unions join hands with bankers and the Liberal government

On April 15, a joint statement was issued by federal Labour Minister Filomena Tassi, the CLC, Unifor, FTQ, CSN, the Bankers Association of Canada, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, among others. Its contents make clear that the unions' first priority is to secure the profits and wealth of Canada's ruling elite by smothering working class opposition.

As the pandemic continued to spread, with well over 1,000 cases and more than 100 deaths being reported on a daily basis throughout April, the well-paid union bureaucrats and their corporate cronies warned that it would be necessary to “remain flexible and adaptable in how we respond ... above all, we must continue to work together.” Workers and bosses “share common goals,” continued the statement, including the need to “protect the health, safety, and well-being of Canadian workers and keep Canadian businesses ready to come roaring back and ensure the economy can recover by getting people back to work quickly and in a safe manner.”

That the blather about health and safety was little more than window dressing can be seen by the unions’ response to the mass outbreaks of COVID-19 at meat packing plants and to the state’s failure to ensure even frontline health care workers have the requisite Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)—a failure that has resulted in thousands of infections and a mounting toll of deaths.

At the Cargill meat packing plant in High River, Alberta, where over 900 workers were infected, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union refused to organize any job action, even though the company, as it itself noted, flagrantly ignored safety precautions. Eager to prove the union’s reliability in enforcing contacts and upholding the big business-designed collective bargaining system, UFCW Canada Vice-President Thomas Hesse publicly denounced any suggestion Cargill meatpackers take strike action to protect their health and lives, because “A work stoppage would not be legal.”

While ensuring that workers are herded back into unsafe workplaces, the unions’ “collaborative front” with big business also entails submission to mass layoffs. Neither the trade unions nor their NDP parliamentary allies have done anything to organize resistance among 1,200 Toronto Transit Commission workers, 1,000 Resolute Forest Products workers in Quebec, 1,100 Calfrac Well Services workers across North America, 1,500 Translink transit workers in Vancouver, 1,500 employees of Halifax Regional Municipality or 1,000 Shaw Communications workers across Canada, to mention only some of the largest lay-offs announced over the past few weeks.

### **The May 8 CLC statement: the unions assist a reckless “reopening” of the economy**

On May 8, the CLC released a document cynically entitled “Health and safety conditions for reopening sectors of the economy.” Its purpose is to provide the unions with political cover as they line up behind the drive of corporate Canada and its political hirelings to prioritize profit over human lives by reopening huge swathes of the economy without even ensuring elementary protective measures for workers and their families.

The statement lays out at great length detailed requirements for workplace safety and worker protection. A typical passage reads, “Before opening, employers must have in place a safety plan that keeps workers healthy and safe and ensures that workplaces don’t contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in the community. Specifically, employers must have an infection prevention and control plan, developed with the participation of workplace health and safety committees, or worker health and safety representatives. This plan must be in place before an employer is allowed to re-open. This plan must include a detailed health and safety response in the event of a workplace COVID-19 outbreak. Governments must have the capacity and commitment to enforcing occupational health and safety laws.”

This is all hot air, aimed at shoring up the unions’ rapidly diminishing credibility in the eyes of working people. The well-paid bureaucrats know full well that Canada’s federal and provincial labour boards invariably

side with the corporate bosses. Out of more than 200 workplace safety complaints received by authorities in Ontario related to COVID-19, not a single one has been upheld.

The unions are working hand-in-glove with management to open huge plants where infection prevention is next to impossible, including the Detroit Three’s auto production facilities in Ontario. In Quebec, the Quebec Federation of Labour applauded the back-to-work drive spearheaded by the province’s right-wing populist premier, Francois Legault, as an “economic recovery plan.” This under conditions where Legault’s government has not even managed to supply PPE to all health care workers, and systematic COVID-19 testing is not being carried out at care facilities where dozens have died and scores of workers have fallen sick.

The unions’ callous indifference to this reality does not flow from ignorance, but is a deliberate policy aimed at corralling workers back to their jobs so the financial elite can begin raking in profits once again. As the CLC noted in its “Health and safety” document, forcing millions of workers back to work “is a monumental challenge in the era of COVID-19, but it is a challenge that we must meet.” At no point did the CLC bureaucrats even consider calling for a shutdown of all non-essential activities until the pandemic is contained, because to do so would require expropriating the wealth of the corporations and super-rich to support working people through the crisis.

### **The May 11 joint statement: Unions and bosses promote Canadian nationalism and an imperialist agenda**

The latest statement issued under the joint byline of the CLC’s Yussuff and Beatty, a former Conservative cabinet minister and current president of the Chamber of Commerce, sums up the intimate collaboration that has taken place between the unions and corporate elite in recent months. It seeks to conceal the anti-worker character of this collaboration with reactionary Canadian nationalist appeals, while pledging the CLC’s support for Canadian imperialism as it seeks to uphold and advance its world position in the face of an unprecedented economic collapse and a surge in global commercial and geopolitical antagonisms.

The pandemic has “tied our wellbeing to one another like never before,” the statement begins, before adding, “Our fellow Canadians are relying on collective effort to overcome this crisis.”

Time and again, Canada’s trade unions have wrapped themselves in the Maple Leaf over the past four decades to ram through unpopular measures to boost the competitive position of Canadian capital on the world stage and attack wages and working conditions for workers. From the Canadian Auto Workers nationalist split in the mid-1980s from the UAW to the unions’ promotion of Trudeau and his Liberals as a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives, claims that all Canadians are “in it together” and that Canadian capitalism is, or can be, a “kinder, gentler” alternative to the rapacious US dollar republic have served to disarm the working class in the face of a ruling class offensive on their jobs, wages and social and democratic rights.

Yussuff and Beatty make clear that driving workers back-to-work amid the pandemic is but the beginning of a massive new assault on the working class aimed at strengthening the competitive position of Canadian big business and its ability to assert its predatory interests on the world stage, through intrigue, aggression and war. “The pandemic will change how we live, how we work and how we use technology,” write the partners Yussuff and Beatty. “We will enter recovery with substantial new public and private debt. The reversal of decades of economic globalization and international supply chains will create challenges for a trading nation

like ours. We will need to revisit policies on health care infrastructure, strategic reserves of key supplies, and ensuring domestic production facilities for critical medical equipment. Canada requires a process to discuss these transformational changes *and to avoid stakeholders going off in different directions* [emphasis added].”

Coming straight from the horse’s mouth, the message being sent to the ruling elite by the union bureaucracy could not be clearer. The formation of a long-term corporatist alliance, a “national economic task force,” will help tackle the “challenges for a trading nation” and other “transformational changes,” like how to reduce “substantial new public and private debt,” without “stakeholders going off in different directions”—i.e., without triggering an explosion of working class opposition to capitalist austerity and war.

### **Workers must build rank-and-file committees to assert their class interests and fight for socialism**

The union bureaucracy’s intensification of its partnership with big business and government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon. In the US, the UAW, like Unifor, has plotted with the automakers to overcome worker resistance to a premature reopening of the plants. In Europe, the Trades Union Congress in Britain, and IG Metall and other major unions in Germany are assisting governments in herding workers back to unsafe workplaces and appealing on behalf of the major corporations for bailouts.

In Canada, as around the world, the unions have become ever more integrated with corporate management and the state over the past four decades. The development of this tripartite union-state-big business alliance against the working class has been driven by objective changes in the structure of world capitalism and the material interests of the labour bureaucracy, an upper-middle class layer that feeds on the crumbs capital rewards it for its services in policing the working class.

Based on an acceptance of capitalist private property, the unions have always been hostile to the struggle for socialism and traditionally sought to limit the activity of the working class to pressuring the bosses for better wages and working conditions. However, with the globalization of production in the 1980s, the unions and their social democratic allies in parties such as the NDP, the British Labour Party and German SPD junked their traditional national reformist programs, which had been based on the possibility of placing certain restraints in capital within the confines of a nationally regulated market.

Instead, the labour bureaucrats sought to defend their privileges by imposing wage and job cuts to attract investors and boost global corporate competitiveness, and by developing new sinecures through their burgeoning corporatist partnership with management and the state—including investment funds, of which in Canada, the QFL’s Solidarity Fund with its more than \$9 billion in assets is the most notorious example.

As part of this sharp shift to the right, the NDP, as exemplified by the actions of the 1990-95 Ontario NDP government under Bob Rae, imposed brutal austerity on the working class whenever it came to power in the provinces.

The unions for their part, shaken by the mass working class upsurge against the Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris and its Thatcherite Common Sense Revolution, began in the late 1990s, to develop an intimate partnership with the Liberals.

Although this began at the provincial level in Ontario, where the union-backed McGuinty-Wynne Liberal governments imposed further austerity and tax cuts for big business and the rich from 2003-18, the unions went

on to become a key pillar of Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government when it came to power in 2015.

Over the past five years, the unions have supported and helped implement many of Trudeau’s major initiatives, including the negotiation of the US/Mexico/Canada Agreement (USMCA) to replace NAFTA, and a massive rearmament program. USMCA is a crucial part of the Canadian ruling elite’s strategy of deepening its military-strategic partnership with US imperialism by consolidating a North American trade bloc under Washington’s leadership, which can be used to compete economically and militarily with Canadian imperialism’s global rivals, above all Russia and China.

Workers cannot reform the unions or reverse their integration with business and the state, either through a change of leadership or with “pressure” from below, as their pseudo-left hangers-on claim. As has been shown time and again, the union bureaucrats will respond to working class pressure and rank-and-file initiative by throwing their arms even more tightly around the necks of their big business and government partners, and with deception and ruthlessness seek to suppress strikes and smother popular opposition.

Workers can assert their class interests only through a political and organizational break with pro-capitalist unions. This requires the establishment of rank-and-file committees in factories and all other workplaces, independent of and in opposition to the unions, to fight for the immediate measures needed to staunch the pandemic and protect the livelihoods of working people. This program must include irreconcilable opposition to the efforts of the capitalist class to prioritize private profit over human life. It must contain demands for hundreds of billions to support the health care system, laid off workers, and small businesses. These funds can and must be obtained through the expropriation of big business and seizure of the hundreds of billions in government funds handed over to the banks and rich investors.

The realization of these urgently required measures is unthinkable unless the working class wages a frontal assault on the capitalist profit system and its private ownership of the means of production. Workers fighting to establish rank-and-file committees must therefore link their struggle for the measures urgently needed to contain the pandemic with the development of an independent working class political movement aimed at breaking the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over society through the establishment of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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