

Swallowing camels and straining on gnats—Canada’s pseudo-left Fightback group “discovers” top union leader practices “class collaboration”

Roger Jordan, Keith Jones**20 November 2020**

Echoing the complaints of a section of the trade union bureaucracy, Fightback—the Canadian affiliate of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency—published an article on its website last week that denounced Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff and his leadership team for “cozying up to Liberal capitalist politicians” and practising “class collaborationist politics.”

This criticism was occasioned by the CLC leadership’s issuing of a joint letter with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce endorsing former Liberal Finance Minister and pension fund CEO Bill Morneau for the post of Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The joint endorsement “caused shockwaves throughout the labour movement” and prompted “a series of denunciations” from “prominent labour leaders,” an indignant Fightback informed its readers.

Any worker or young person seeking a genuine alternative to capitalist austerity and militarism must be rubbing their eyes in disbelief: Where have these self-styled “Marxists” been since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? Where were their condemnations and exposures of Yussuff and the CLC when they supported the Liberal government and Bank of Canada in orchestrating the biggest bailout of the banks, corporations, and super-rich investors in Canadian history? Why has Fightback not indicted the leaders of the 3.3 million-member CLC and their affiliated unions for their role in supporting and enforcing the ruling class’ campaign to force non-essential workers back on the job amid the pandemic?

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented in numerous articles, Canada’s trade unions have responded to the pandemic—the trigger for the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s—by dramatically expanding their corporatist relations with big business and the state, as epitomized by their close partnership with the federal Liberal government.

In early March, as financial markets quaked and the growing number of COVID-19 cases were demonstrating that Ottawa and the provinces had badly mismanaged the pandemic, the CLC leaders began a series of closed-door consultations with the Trudeau Liberal government, the Chamber of Commerce and other business organizations to develop a response tailored to the needs of the ruling class. On March 12, Yussuff described the emerging partnership between the unions, business, and capitalist politicians as a “collaborative front.”

When Trudeau and Morneau subsequently funneled more than \$650 billion to the big banks and financial oligarchy, Yussuff, all of the CLC’s member unions, and the union-supported NDP covered this up. At the same time, the CLC hailed the establishment of various makeshift, ration-style benefits, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. It even boasted it had helped design them. The Trudeau Liberals, declared a March 18 CLC press release, are providing “money directly to the workers who need it most.” “We look forward,” said Yussuff, “to working with the government in the coming days and weeks to ensure no one gets left behind.”

As the virus continued to rage, killing thousands in long-term care facilities, the CLC met with the Chamber of Commerce and other business lobby groups to plot a reckless return-to-work amid the pandemic. Already on April 15, the CLC and Unifor issued a joint statement with the Liberals’ federal Labour Ministry, the Bankers Association of Canada, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. The statement proclaimed that workers and bosses “share common goals,” including ensuring “Canadian businesses (are) ready to come roaring back and (that) the economy can recover by getting people back to work quickly and in a safe manner.”

The following month, Yussuff co-wrote an article with Chamber of Commerce head and former Conservative cabinet minister Perrin Beatty. Its central purpose was to advance the corporatist claim that bosses and workers share the same interests, and that workers’ jobs and conditions must always and at all times be subordinated to corporate profitability. “The pandemic has tied our wellbeing to one another like never before,” the partners asserted.

Yussuff and Beatty proposed the creation of a national economic task force, which they explicitly argued would serve to ensure the competitiveness of Canadian capitalism on the world stage. They warned “substantial new public and private debt,” “the reversal of decades of economic globalization” and mounting geo-strategic rivalry represent “challenges for a trading nation like ours.” The task force would be a forum to discuss these transformational changes” and “avoid stakeholders going off in different directions.”

As these lines were being written, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) demonstrated in practice what such policies look like. After Air Canada announced plans to axe more than 22,000 jobs to protect its profit margins and payouts to shareholders, CUPE ensured that “stakeholders” would not “go off in different directions”

by suppressing all worker opposition to this savage assault and making its own proposals to company management on how their cost-cutting strategy could be achieved.

Other unions have been no less ruthless. In the face of widespread opposition from rank-and-file educators and parents, teacher unions across the country participated in drafting reckless back-to-school plans. When the schools reopened in September, under what they conceded were unsafe conditions, the unions ruled out any job action to protect the health and lives of their members, their families, and the public on the grounds it would be “illegal.” Schools have since emerged as one of the main sources of new coronavirus infections.

Throughout this entire period, Fightback uttered not a peep of criticism of Yussuff and the CLC for “cozying up” to the Liberal government” and big business. When more than a thousand meatpackers were forced back to work following a massive COVID-19 outbreak at the High River Cargill plant in Alberta by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) with the warning that a strike would be “illegal,” Fightback did not publish an article savaging the “class collaborationist” policies of the UFCW.

Nor did Fightback rouse itself to remark on Unifor President Jerry Dias’ appearance at a joint press conference with Trudeau, hard-right Ontario Premier Doug Ford, and the CEO of Ford Canada. Celebrating hundreds of millions of dollars in government subsidies for the automaker and a concessions-laden contract that will facilitate replacing high-seniority workers with low-paid two-tier and temporary workers, Dias crowed, “We’re all rowing in the same direction.”

When Yussuff gave the NDP its marching orders in early September and proclaimed that the social-democrats have an “obligation” to work with Trudeau’s minority government, Fightback did not issue a scathing rebuke of the CLC president for “cozying up to Liberal capitalist politicians.”

On the contrary, Fightback leader Alex Grant wrote that it was a matter of indifference whether the NDP—a party in which Fightback functions as a loyal opposition—voted for the Liberal’s Sept. 23 Throne Speech and kept the minority Trudeau government in power or not.

Fightback’s stance on the unions and NDP propping up the Trudeau Liberals makes a mockery of its own ruinous, national-reformist perspective that claims the NDP—since its formation in 1961, a party of trade union bureaucrats, upper middle-class professionals, and small business people—can be “won back to socialism” and made an instrument for fighting “austerity” and for socialism.

In practice, Fightback accepts with a shrug of the shoulders that the unions and NDP support a government led by the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government. One moreover, that behind a smokescreen of phony progressive rhetoric, is spearheading the ruling class’ murderous back-to-work campaign and raising military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026 in preparation for war, including against China and Russia.

This development is not new. One would need no more than the fingers on one hand to count the number of articles Fightback has published that have made an issue of the unions and the NDP’s support for the Trudeau Liberals during the past five years. That is from the 2015 “Anybody but Conservative campaign”—in which the former Fightback leader and then Canadian Unions of Postal Workers (CUPW) President Mike Palecek played an especially prominent role—through the Liberals’ re-election in 2019, to their “collaborative front” with Trudeau during the current pandemic.

The question that remains to be answered is why Fightback having swallowed the camel, now strains at the gnat: Why, having kept silent on Yussuff and the union bureaucracy’s collusion with the government and big business in their bailout of the rich and super-rich and the COVID-19 back-to-work campaign, has Fightback gone into a tizzy over the CLC leadership and Chamber of Commerce nominating their former partner Morneau to head the OECD?

The answer is that the unprecedented bailout of corporate Canada at the expense of working people was supported by the entire union bureaucracy, as is the back-to-work campaign. By contrast, Yussuff’s endorsement of Morneau has been seized on by a faction of the union bureaucracy as a means to settle internal scores and position itself for a challenge to Yussuff and his allies at the CLC’s next congress in May 2021.

Fightback, which speaks on behalf of privileged middle class layers in and around the trade union bureaucracy and never takes a political stand that conflicts with these social interests, notes in its article that “a coalition calling itself Team Unite has been created to replace the bureaucracy of Yussuff.” Serving as a bulletin board for these disgruntled layers, Fightback gives pride of place in its article to denunciations of the current CLC leadership from CUPW, CUPE, and the United Steelworkers—all of which have been involved in imposing devastating attacks on their members in recent years.

The only difficulty Fightback sees in this new alliance of scoundrels is that “there is no clear indication of what would fundamentally differentiate this coalition of labour leaders from Yussuff’s class collaborationism.” Fightback solves this problem by portraying the trumped-up issue of Yussuff’s support for Morneau’s next career step as a major political question. It has the advantage of allowing sections of the union bureaucracy and their flunkies in middle class pseudo-left groups like Fightback to thump their chests and make radical-sounding criticisms of the top brass of the union bureaucracy, while doing absolutely nothing to advance an alternative for the working class to the unions’ corporatist alliance with big business and the Liberals.

This episode proves once again that Fightback functions as a “left” fig leaf for the union bureaucracy. At the very point when workers are entering in ever greater numbers into struggles independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses, Fightback intervenes spouting “socialist” and “Marxist” sounding phrases in a desperate bid to prop up their rapidly waning authority in the eyes of working people. A genuine working class movement against war and social inequality, and the ruling elite’s murderous response to the pandemic, can be built only through a relentless political exposure of these “Marxist” imposters and attorneys and publicists for the union bureaucracy.



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