

The Ontario Federation of Labour's fraudulent May Day "day of action"

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4 May 2022

On Sunday, May 1, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), which counts over a million workers in its 54 affiliated unions, organized a "day of action for a workers-first agenda." It consisted of relatively sparsely attended protest rallies in some two dozen cities across the province.

The unions sought to portray last Sunday's protests as echoing the traditions of May Day, the global workers' holiday initiated by the international socialist movement in 1889. What a farce! Their "day of action" was nothing but a cynical political maneuver aimed at drumming up support for their campaign for the election of a "progressive" provincial government—whether formed by the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Liberals, or more likely some combination of the two—when Ontarians go to the polls on Thursday, June 2.

Prepared by the union bureaucracy over many months, the May 1 "day of action" was timed to coincide with this week's official launch of the Ontario election campaign. At the 2021 OFL convention last November, a document proclaiming a "vision" for Ontario was adopted that included a series of demands, some of which address the disastrous social situation confronting working people under conditions of rampant inflation and the unchecked spread of COVID-19. Among them are the call for a \$20 minimum wage, affordable housing, decent work and paid sick days.

Other demands cater to the privileged interests of middle class elements around the upper echelons of the union bureaucracy, such as the call for "supports for equity-seeking groups," i.e., the creation of lucrative posts in government and on joint union-government committees for representatives of various "identity" groups based on race, gender and sexual orientation.

On March 6, the OFL organized what it called an "activist assembly" to build organizational networks in localities across the province to mobilize support for the day of action.

Workers who have suffered four years of savage public spending cuts and strikebreaking by Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government, and the ruling elite's pursuit of a policy of mass infection and death during the pandemic to protect corporate profits, could be forgiven for rubbing their eyes in wonder at the cynicism of the OFL's claims to be "fighting" for a "workers-first agenda." After all, it is precisely the OFL, its affiliates, and other unions like Unifor that have served as the chief suppressors of worker opposition to the Ford government's austerity agenda and dangerous working conditions during the pandemic.

The OFL and its affiliates are intensifying their efforts to smother the class struggle under conditions where rampant inflation triggered by the pandemic's disruption of supply chains and the imperialist powers' economic warfare against Russia are plunging workers into poverty.

Their own promotional material for last Sunday's event makes clear that the demands they raise are not intended to mobilize workers in a political struggle, but to harness them to the unions' bankrupt electoral agenda. In the pompously titled "Workers First Pledge," which participants in Sunday's rallies were encouraged to sign, it states, "On May 1, I will take action for a better Ontario. And on June 2, I will vote for it."

In other words, after blowing off steam on May Day, the OFL bureaucrats intend to lead workers by the nose to the ballot box, where they will place their cross next to the NDP or Liberals, two parties that are collaborating at the federal level to wage war against Russia and impose austerity on workers, and that have gutted public services and workers' rights in Ontario for the past three decades.

In the world of corporate executives and business wheeling and dealing, with which the OFL's top union bureaucrats have more than a passing familiarity, what the unions did on May Day in Ontario is known as selling working people a bill of goods. Exploiting the attractive power of the day of international day of workers' solidarity, which is still rightly associated by many workers with the struggle for such fundamental rights as the eight-hour day and opposition to imperialist war, the OFL replaces internationalism with flag-waving nationalism and provincialism, and the class struggle with subservience to corporate Canada's political parties.

The OFL was at pains to ensure that its "day of action" respected the provincial borders of Ontario, as if the problems of low wages, poverty and ruthless exploitation by unscrupulous employers are unique to workers in Toronto, Ottawa, and Windsor. And they offered no perspective for workers entering into struggle to win their demands, other than placing a ballot mark next to right-wing political parties committed to the ruling elite's agenda of war abroad and austerity at home.

An unbroken record of sabotage and betrayal of workers' struggles

Immediately following the defeat in the 2018 provincial election of the big business Liberals, whom the unions had supported in power for 15 years as they gouged workers' wages and slashed public spending, the OFL made explicit its bitter opposition to a genuine struggle by working people against Ford, a right-wing populist who at the time was boasting about his admiration for Donald Trump.

The OFL's opposition to any working class challenge to Ford and his government was exemplified by its placing of a countdown clock at the top of its homepage, which remains there to this day, that notes the number of days, hours, and even minutes and seconds Ontarians must wait for the privilege of electing a "progressive" government in 2022, i.e., a right-wing, capitalist regime led by the NDP or Liberals.

Whenever opposition among workers to Ford's draconian spending cuts, privatizations and attacks on workers' rights erupted, the trade unions were on hand to smother it.

In the fall of 2019 and early 2020, hundreds of thousands of teachers and education support staff engaged in a series of job actions, culminating in a one-day province-wide strike of over 200,000 educators in February 2020. Workers wanted to fight Ford's wage-cutting pay cap, which limited pay and benefit increases for over a million public sector workers

to 1 percent per year, attacks on pension rights, and gutting of education budgets. But the education unions prevented the unification of education workers into a common struggle by calling toothless one-day regional strikes and protest stunts, before “suspending” all further job action after being terrified by the broad popular support the one-day province-wide teachers’ strike galvanized. Within weeks of the “suspension” of the teachers’ struggle, the education unions seized on the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic to sell out the teachers’ demands by agreeing to concessions-filled contracts with the Ford government in the name of “pulling together” against COVID.

The suppression of the education workers’ fight and of countless smaller workers’ struggles across Canada was part of a broader process in which the unions, in response to the eruption of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression and World War II, vastly expanded their corporatist partnership with big business and the capitalist state.

In the name of “sticking together” and “pulling together to fight the pandemic,” the union bureaucrats joined with government ministers at the federal and provincial levels in March-April 2020 to loot the public treasury and funnel hundreds of billions of dollars into the financial markets, and bank and corporate coffers, to safeguard the wealth and investments of the capitalist elite. Then, the unions worked hand-in-glove with the federal Trudeau and Ford provincial governments to prematurely force non-essential workers back on the job and churning out corporate profits, resulting in six successive waves of mass infection and death.

As thousands of Ontarians and tens of thousands of people died across Canada from an entirely preventable disease, the principal concern of the union bureaucracy was to block any action by working people that would disrupt the “labour relations” and “collective bargaining” systems upon which their lucrative relations with corporate executives and the state rest. Thus, when asked in September 2020 what steps the unions would take to prevent teachers being forced into COVID-infested schools by the Ford government, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation President Harvey Bischof denounced strikes and indeed any job action to protect teachers’ health and lives as “illegal.”

Instead, the teachers unions instructed teachers to file individual “work refusals” if they had concerns, a process deliberately intended to prevent collective action and leave the decision on whether there was a risk of COVID-19 infection to the very same government institutions that were pursuing the homicidal profits before lives policy.

Other unions played a no less despicable role. UFCW bureaucrats ordered meatpacking workers back into Cargill’s High River plant in May 2020 after COVID-19 had claimed the lives of three workers and killed more than a thousand others. Like Bischof, UFCW Local 404 President Thomas Hesse countered worker calls for action to protect them from the deadly virus with denunciations of job action as “illegal.” Unifor collaborated with the auto bosses and Ford government to reopen the auto plants under totally unsafe conditions, then sat on its hands as Stellantis, formerly Fiat-Chrysler, destroyed thousands of jobs at its Windsor Assembly Plant in a move which Unifor Local 444 president Dave Cassidy dismissively described as a “business decision.”

In New Brunswick, the Canadian Union of Public Employees sabotaged a strike by over 22,000 municipal, health care, education and transport workers for wage increases and the defence of pension rights in November 2021 at the very point where public support was building for a direct political confrontation with the right-wing Higgs government and its policy of allowing the virus to spread freely through the province’s schools and nursing homes.

people

Workers reviewing this unbroken record of the unions’ suppression of workers’ struggles are entitled to ask of the well-paid OFL bureaucrats: why, after selling out our struggles for improved conditions and the protection of our very lives over the past four years, do you suddenly preach the need to “take action” and “fight” now? The reality is that unlike the 2019 teachers’ struggle, the fight by autoworkers against getting infected on the job, and the battle of New Brunswick public sector workers—struggles that posed the necessity of a political fight against the entire ruling elite and its capitalist state—the Ontario provincial election campaign is a battleground for union bureaucrats to secure their own privileges under the incoming provincial government.

If the OFL bureaucracy had drafted a more honest sales pitch, its slogan for its May 1 event would not have been for a “workers-first agenda,” but a “union bureaucrats-first agenda.” They support a changing of the guard at Queens Park because the unions can more easily cooperate with the Liberals and NDP in enforcing austerity on the working class than with the Tories, who take a more confrontational approach, at least in public, to the trade unions.

The OFL’s model is the Liberal/union/New Democrat alliance at the federal level, which was codified in late March in a “confidence-and-supply” agreement under which the NDP has pledged to keep the minority Trudeau government in office until June 2025. Behind all the absurd rhetoric about “delivering for Canadians,” the Liberal/NDP deal is based on waging war against Russia, vastly expanding Canadian imperialism’s military budget, and maintaining “fiscal responsibility” at home. It builds on the close collaboration between top union bureaucrats, like now disgraced Unifor President Jerry Dias, and Trudeau government ministers since the Liberals came to power in 2015.

Over the past seven years, union bureaucrats have served as semi-official government advisers in the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was crucial for the defence of corporate Canada’s profit interests and the protection of Canadian imperialism’s global ambitions, and the bailout of the super-rich during the pandemic. The symbiotic relationship between Trudeau’s Liberals and the union bureaucracy was underscored by Trudeau’s appointment of Hassan Yussuff to a lucrative seat in the Senate, Canada’s upper chamber of parliament, just days after he stepped as Canadian Labour Congress president.

The formal agreement between the federal Liberals and NDP was finalized against the backdrop of the eruption of NATO’s proxy war with Russia over Ukraine, in which Canadian imperialism is playing an especially aggressive role. It also came just weeks after powerful sections of the political establishment built up and emboldened the far-right Freedom Convoy as a means of intimidating popular opposition to the dismantling of all anti-COVID public health measures and pushing politics sharply further.

The Liberals, unions and NDP responded to both these developments, which further radicalized working people, by doubling down on their support for the repressive powers of the capitalist state and its institutions, including the military, police and intelligence apparatus. The NDP endorsed Trudeau’s state of emergency to end the Freedom Convoy’s occupation of downtown Ottawa, and is now voting for war with Russia and massive military spending hikes.

The way forward for workers

The Liberal/NDP/union alliance: A conspiracy against working

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) has consistently fought for a strategy for working people diametrically opposed to that being pursued by the OFL. In a statement released in July 2019 calling for the preparation of a “political general strike against Ontario’s Doug Ford,” we explicitly warned about the unions’ decades-long role in demobilizing worker opposition, including through their support, in the name of the fighting the Tories, for a succession of Ontario Liberal governments from 2003 through 2018 that imposed austerity, privatization and, further tax cuts for big business and the rich.

“The fight against Ford,” explained our July 2019 statement, “can be successful only if workers break free of the political control of the trade unions and NDP, and strive to unite their struggles with those of workers across Canada, in the United States, and internationally in a global working-class counter-offensive against capitalist austerity and war.

“A sharp and urgent warning must be made about the role being played by the trade unions. They are determined to sabotage the working-class opposition to Ford, just as they torpedoed the mass movement against Mike Harris and his Thatcherite Common Sense Revolution two decades ago.”

The statement concluded by urging workers to construct independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace to fight for workers’ demands and prepare a political general strike to bring down Ford. “To defeat the global capitalist assault on the social rights of the working class, defend democratic rights and oppose war, workers in Ontario and across Canada must take their place in the global working-class counter-offensive and fight to impart it with a socialist direction,” the statement stressed.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the SEP intensified its struggle in the working class for the building of rank-and-file committees. The establishment of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which includes education workers from Ontario, and more recently the CP Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, were products of the determined fight to free workers from the straitjacket imposed by the corporatist unions and mobilize them in a global struggle against imperialist war, the pandemic and declining living standards. Workers in other sectors, including auto, manufacturing, the public sector and health care, should follow this example.

Above all, the guiding principle of this fight was that workers in Canada must unify their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and internationally. The rank-and-file committees established under the SEP’s guidance have therefore declared their affiliation with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which was established in May 2021 to provide coordination and political leadership for a global mass movement of workers against the pandemic, the threat of war, and attacks on jobs and workers’ rights.

Workers in Ontario should not allow themselves to be manipulated into lending support for the unions’ bankrupt campaign for a “progressive” government. They should not allow their urgent demands for wage hikes, improved job security, and an expansion of critical public services to become background music to the unions’ push to bring to power a right-wing government that is no less hostile to workers’ interests than Ford’s Conservatives.

Last Sunday, the IWA-RFC co-sponsored the International May Day Rally with the *World Socialist Web Site*, the SEP (Canada) and its sister parties around the world. The rally, which heard from speakers from 11 countries, put forward a unified global perspective for the working class based on the understanding that the fight against capitalist austerity, war and the destruction of living standards is possible only through the adoption of a socialist program. We appeal to all workers in Ontario seeking a genuine way forward out of the social, economic and political crisis produced by the profit system to watch the recording of this critical event and make the decision to join and build the SEP as the mass

socialist party of the working class.



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