

Unifor staggers through triennial convention, as rank-and-file seethes over union corruption, concessions

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The stench of corruption pervaded the triennial convention of Unifor, Canada's largest private sector union, which was held in Toronto last week.

With the union's long-time president, Jerry Dias, forced to step down in disgrace last March after being exposed as a COVID profiteer, the union top brass were desperate to put distance between themselves and his misdeeds. But they made clear that they fully intend to uphold Dias' rotten corporatist legacy—ensuring the global “competitiveness,” i.e., profitability, of Canadian big business through concession contracts and staunchly supporting the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government and the Liberal/New Democratic Party parliamentary alliance that sustains it in office.

Lana Payne beat Dias' hand-picked successor, Scott Doherty, and Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy in the race for Unifor president. Payne, who was celebrated by the corporate media as Unifor's “first female president,” cast herself as an “outsider” with a clean pair of hands. In reality, Payne is part of the same bureaucracy as Dias. She served as national secretary-treasurer under his leadership and as Unifor's acting president, after he was forced out in a scandal that she vainly tried to cover up.

There were no significant political or programmatic differences between the three candidates. In the weeks prior to the convention, they engaged in an unseemly factional squabble over who would control Unifor's considerable resources. This included leaking information—that by right all Unifor members should be privy to as a matter of course—documenting the enormous expense claims of senior union officials.

In her concluding remarks to the convention, Payne declared, “We have truly come together this week to move our union forward. You have shown that it is the union—all of us together—that can take on the challenges we face as workers.”

This is disingenuous bluster. The oblique reference to “moving forward” is aimed at giving the impression that now that that “the bad apple” Dias has been removed for accepting a \$50,000 kickback from a seller of COVID-19 tests, the union can put the corruption scandal to rest and carry on as “normal.” In fact, what the millions spent annually on the expense claims of senior Unifor officials, including for first-class travel and five-star hotel visits, shows is that it is standard practice for Unifor bureaucrats to feather their respective nests at workers' expense.

This corruption arises organically from the corporatist partnership Unifor—and its most important predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)—have forged with the Detroit Three auto bosses,

corporate Canada and the state over the past four decades. In the United States, a dozen top United Auto Workers (UAW) officials, including two former presidents, have been sentenced to jail time for accepting kickbacks, padding expense accounts and otherwise stealing from the workers they claim to represent.

Payne's attempt to posture as just another rank-and-file worker is a brazen insult to the hundreds of thousands of Unifor members in the auto, auto parts, aviation and other industries who have been forced to labour in deadly conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The convention was not about meeting “the challenges we face as workers,” but rather the “challenges” confronted by Payne and the Unifor bureaucracy she now heads as they seek to contain and derail mounting worker demands for militant action to counter soaring prices, employer demands for speed-up, and decades of contract concessions.

Unifor's “Build Back Better” collective bargaining program, which deliberately echoes a slogan employed by the Trudeau government and by the Biden administration in the United States, makes clear that one of the union's key tasks in the coming period will be suppressing workers' wage demands. Unifor, it declares, will “(r)efuse to accept any employer demands for pay concessions or any new two-tier wage structures in collective agreements. In instances where two-tier wage provisions exist, the union commits to consolidating pay structures to eliminate disparities between workers.”

Unifor's defiant posture is a fraud. In recent months, Unifor has negotiated a slew of contracts with pay “increases” well below the current near double-digit inflation rate. Furthermore, if the Unifor bureaucrats can beat their breasts about not accepting “new” two-tier wage structures it is because the union has been complicit since its creation in 2013, and long before that as the Canadian Auto Workers, in imposing multi-tier pay structures throughout Canadian industry.

The fact that the bureaucracy intends to continue its support for low-wage, multi-tier pay rates is underscored by the vaguely formulated commitment to consolidate “pay structures to eliminate disparities between workers” where multi-tier pay scales already exist. As autoworkers know only too well, Unifor “eliminates” pay “disparities” between workers by prevailing on older workers on higher pay and better benefits to accept early retirement so that an increasing percentage of workers are ensnared in the same substandard poverty-wage structure. The entrenchment of multi-tier wage structures and removal of older “legacy” workers from the plants have been key elements in the CAW/Unifor strategy to attract investments by slashing automakers' labour costs and maintaining a

“Canadian (investor) advantage” based on the lower value of the Canadian vis a vis US dollar.

Reducing labour costs for auto manufacturers is a key component of Unifor’s new national auto policy, which Payne presented at a press conference August 11. The report calls for the federal government, working in concert with Ontario and other provinces, to establish a national auto industrial policy and provide lavish subsidies to companies building electronic vehicles and EV components like batteries, so as to ensure high profits. Stressing that Canada is at an “inflection point” in the transition to EVs, Payne trumpeted Unifor’s goal of making Canadian capitalism “a global leader” in battery-electric vehicle production.

Unifor’s role as a cheap-labour contractor for corporate Canada flows directly from the social position of the bureaucrats who staff the union apparatus. Living on their six-figure salaries and corporate expense accounts, Unifor officials have far more in common with corporate executives and government ministers than they do with the workers they claim to represent. Fervent proponents of Canadian nationalism and the interests of the capitalist state, they work to secure a “competitive” advantage for their “own” businesses and investors.

In pursuit of this agenda, Unifor has developed a close partnership with the Trudeau government—from Dias’ leading role in helping bring the Liberals to power through the 2015 “Anybody but Conservative” campaign to his acting as a semi-official Trudeau government adviser during the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Dias and Unifor advocate the same “North America First” economic protectionist strategy based on a strengthening of Canadian imperialism’s decades-long alliance with US imperialism as does the dominant section of Canada’s ruling elite. Dias was also a champion of the ruling class’s back-to-work campaign during the pandemic, which protected corporate profits while endangering the health and very lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and their families.

Following last September’s federal election, Dias and Unifor publicly initiated the call for a formal Liberal/NDP governmental alliance. In March, just weeks after the outbreak of the NATO-Russia war over Ukraine, it materialized, to the rapturous applause of Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress, in the form of a “confidence-and-supply” agreement under which the NDP has pledged to keep the minority Trudeau government in power until June 2025. In the name of “political stability,” the NDP is supporting a Liberal government committed to waging war against Russia, rearming Canada’s military for further imperialist interventions around the world, and making working people pay for this through “post-pandemic” austerity and inflation-driven real wage cuts.

Payne and her colleagues in the Unifor leadership have every intention of continuing the political course charted by Dias. This was underscored by the presence at the convention of federal Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan, who delivered a speech heaping praise on Payne and committing to working with Unifor in the future. If a more senior government official was not present, this was only due to a desire on the part of Trudeau and his inner circle to maintain a certain distance from the discredited Unifor bureaucracy as it sought to extricate itself from the Dias corruption scandal.

The Liberal government and its NDP allies desperately need the Unifor bureaucracy to contain the ongoing corruption scandal so that they can focus on the key task the ruling elite has assigned to it: suppressing the class struggle. Over the past year, a series of militant strikes and worker protests have swept across Canada, from miners in

Sudbury, to public sector workers in New Brunswick, Ontario construction workers, and CP Rail workers. Over recent months, Unifor has sabotaged strikes by over 2,000 workers at passenger carrier Via Rail and grocery packaging workers at Metro.

This resurgence of class struggle is only in its initial stages. Workers are being driven into struggle by rampant inflation caused by the pandemic’s disruption of supply chains, the massive sums the state has funnelled into the financial markets since 2020 to prop up the fortunes of the rich and super rich, and the imperialist war on Russia, in which Canada is playing a leading role. In the weeks immediately ahead, contracts will expire for over 250,000 Ontario teachers and education support workers, who are on a direct collision course with the hard-right Ford government. Around 400,000 public sector workers, including health care workers and teachers, are without contracts in British Columbia, where the provincial NDP government is determined to offload the full weight of the crisis onto the workers by imposing below-inflation settlements. Unifor’s task will be to ensure that industrial workers do not join this working class upsurge, which must repudiate the Liberal/union/NDP alliance and become an industrial and political working class counter-offensive if it is to challenge capitalist austerity and intensified exploitation.

Payne acknowledged the growing class tensions in Canada during her opening report, stating, “Friends, we are in a moment, a moment of renewed labour militancy. And we must seize this moment.” Coming from the head of the Unifor bureaucracy, the pledge to “seize this moment” must be taken by workers as a threat more than anything else. It amounts to a warning to the bureaucracy to be on its guard, lest a movement of rank-and-file workers from below escapes the union’s suffocating control and develops into an open rebellion against the entire big business establishment.

Conditions for such a movement developing are increasingly favourable. This fact has been underlined by the campaign that Will Lehman, a Mack Truck worker from Pennsylvania, is waging for the presidency of the UAW. Lehman is fighting for the abolition of the bureaucracy, the return of the UAW’s vast assets to the control of the rank-and-file, and the building of rank-and-file committees in every factory to unify American, Canadian, and Mexican autoworkers on the basis of an international strategy to fight for decent-paying, secure jobs for all. Despite the efforts of the UAW bureaucracy to suppress his campaign, Lehman was nominated by two worker delegates at the recent UAW convention and will appear on the ballot this fall. Workers in Canada must lend their full support to Lehman’s campaign. This means, above all, initiating a rebellion against the nationalist, pro-capitalist Unifor bureaucracy, through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees entirely independent of the union apparatus and capitalist political establishment.



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