Canada’s pseudo-left Fightback group champions Teamsters’ top-down Amazon unionization drive

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The pseudo-left Fightback group, the Canadian affiliate of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency, is waging a campaign to promote a top-down drive by the Teamsters to establish itself as the bargaining agent for tens of thousands of Amazon employees across the global conglomerate’s Canadian facilities.

In a June 15 article entitled “Amazon’s unionization campaign spreads to Canada: victory to the workers!”, Fightback asserted that the drive provides “an urgent reminder of the need to unionize the non-unionized.” Willfully ignoring the unions’ decades-long suppression of the class struggle and their ever-deeper integration into corporate management and the state, Fightback baldly asserts that a working class regimented by the pro-capitalist unions “is stronger and better able to resist the bosses’ attacks” and that union organization constitutes “the first steps in developing revolutionary consciousness.”

A more accurate slogan for Fightback’s campaign would be “victory to the bureaucratic union apparatuses.” It serves to strengthen the control of the unions over one of the fastest growing sections of the working class and bolster thereby the trade union/Liberal/NDP alliance that is the Canadian ruling class’s key political mechanism for enforcing its imperialist interests at home and abroad.

The Teamsters are endeavouring to unionize workers at a series of Ontario fulfillment centres, including sites in Cambridge, Milton, London, and Kitchener, and the Nisku fulfillment centre near Edmonton, Alberta. The Teamsters bureaucracy has committed vast resources to this operation, which was initiated at the union’s “international” convention in June 2021 and is backed by the Biden administration and Trudeau government.

If the high-paid officials who staff the Teamsters’ apparatus want to establish the union as the bargaining agent for the hundreds of thousands of ruthlessly exploited Amazon employees across North America, it is to secure a new stream of dues money and contain and suppress all opposition to brutal working conditions within the state-regulated, pro-employer “collective bargaining” system.

To achieve this, the Teamsters and their pseudo-left promoters are cynically seeking to exploit workers’ justified anger over the horrendous working conditions that prevail in Amazon’s facilities. Workers are bullied into working at a hazardous back-breaking pace, docked for washroom breaks, must adhere to gruelling work schedules, and all for wages little above the minimum wage. Throughout the now two-and-a-half-year-old COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon workers have been forced to continue labouring with virtually no protections. This has resulted in repeated massive outbreaks of the deadly virus. In one infamous case, Amazon’s Brampton, Ontario, Heritage Road fulfillment centre briefly shut down, after recording 600 infections, only because of a closure order from the local public health officer.

A successful struggle against a ruthless global conglomerate like Amazon will require mobilizing workers’ collective power, forging ties and developing a united struggle with Amazon workers in the US and around the world, and a challenge to the big business political establishment and the panoply of pro-employer state institutions that enforce the exploitation of the working class.

The Teamsters are organically incapable of, and bitterly hostile to, mounting such a struggle.

Fightback does not even attempt to explain why bringing in such a notoriously corrupt, nationalist, anti-worker outfit as the Teamsters would represent any sort of “victory to the workers.” As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted in its analysis of the Teamsters’ unionization drive, “The evolution of the Teamsters over the past four decades provides a textbook example of how the entire union bureaucracy has developed into a mechanism for imposing the dictates of corporate management. In workplaces across the United States and Canada, the Teamsters enforce multi-tier wage structures, inadequate health benefits and mandatory overtime. Its promotion of economic nationalism makes a mockery of its boast to be an ‘international’ union.”

Events in the intervening months have provided further confirmation of the correctness of this analysis. In March, CP Rail workers set up the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to combat the Teamsters’ torpedoing of their struggle for improved scheduling and working conditions. Just hours after the rail giant had locked out 3,000 train engineers, conductors and yard workers, the Teamsters arbitrarily imposed on them an anti-democratic binding arbitration procedure, overseen by the Trudeau Liberal government. As a result, CP Rail workers are now burdened with a union “contract” that slashes their real wages and gives management free rein to continue with onerous and hazardous work practices.

Underscoring the Canadian Teamster leadership’s close ties to the federal Liberal government, they invited none other than Chrystia Freeland, Trudeau’s finance minister and the leading war-hawk in Canada’s government, to address their June convention.

Our assessment of the role of the Teamsters and its attempt, with Fightback’s enthusiastic support, to hoodwink Amazon workers into believing that it will use its considerable resources to challenge Amazon and fight for their interests is based on an examination of the development of the class struggle in Canada and around the world over the past four decades.

The nationally based, pro-capitalist unions proved incapable of mounting any progressive response to the globalization of capitalist production from the 1980s onwards. They renounced their function as defense organizations of the working class, which had won limited gains during the post-Second World War boom, and instead have pressured workers to accept concessions to secure investments and enhance the

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"global competitiveness" of "our" employers.

This is exemplified by the dramatic decline in strikes and work-days lost to strikes in all the advanced capitalist countries. This decline, moreover, only accelerated during the last two decades as the ruling class imposed massive contract concessions, eliminated large sections of industry, and implemented wave after wave of austerity.

The transformation of the unions into appendages of corporate management and the state has been accompanied by a plunge in their memberships, as workers, especially the young and precariously employed, shun organizations that function as labour syndicates, imposing two-tier wages and suppressing rank-and-file dissent. In Britain, the Trades Union Congress, which had 13 million members at the end of the 1970s, represents little more than 6 million. In the US, about 6 percent of private sector workers are unionized, a rate akin to that at the beginning of the 20th century before the emergence of mass industrial unions as the result of the sit-down strikes of the 1930s.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), since the beginning of the 1990s, has anticipated and politically prepared for a resurgence of working class struggle. It explained such a resurgence can and will only develop through a rebellion against the trade union apparatuses, the establishment "left" parties, and their pseudo-left appendages like Fightback, and as an increasingly self-conscious international movement, fighting to unify workers' struggles across national borders and continents.

This perspective has been confirmed in spades. Fightback's article championing the Teamsters' organization drive at Amazon notes there has been "a working-class awakening in the United States." What it neglects to say is that this "awakening" has taken the form of a rank-and-file upsurge in opposition to the union bureaucracy, with workers time and again voting down union-endorsed concessionary contracts. Moreover, at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, Dana auto parts, the BNSF railroad and in numerous other struggles, rank-and-file committees supported by the Socialist Equality Party, the ICFI's American section, have emerged as the pole of opposition to the unions' attempts to smother them.

Based on this analysis and experiences, we argued last October that Amazon employees seeking to put an end to their slave-like working conditions should establish rank-and-file committees to unify their struggle with workers around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We wrote, "A genuine working class struggle to enforce better working conditions against this global corporate giant can only be successful if it unifies Amazon workers internationally. As such an offensive develops, it will inevitably come into conflict with Bezos and other oligarchs, who claim they have absolute power to dictate how and under what conditions workers are forced to labour, and the capitalist governments who serve them. It will unavoidably raise the question of which class rules society: the rich oligarchs with their multi-billion stock portfolios, or workers seeking a livable wage and decent working conditions. For this reason, the struggle at Amazon is above all a political one that can only be conducted on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program."

Fightback defends the union bureaucracy

Fightback cannot entirely ignore the unending series of union sellouts and betrayals, which have resulted in growing rank-and-file anger with the union bureaucracy. However, Fightback's criticisms of the union leadership, even if they sometimes employ the words "bureaucrats" and "bureaucracy," have nothing in common with Marxism. They present various symptoms of bureaucracy, like "conservatism," corruption, and the deleterious impact organizational pressures have on "militant" union leaders, as its cause. Union betrayals are invariably described as "unfortunate" or "mistakes" that can be corrected by applying more pressure from below or by replacing "bad" union leaders. Fightback denies that the union bureaucracy constitutes a privileged, social layer of state-supported functionaries, with interests different and opposed to those of the workers they purport to represent. Not only does the bureaucracy pay itself upper-middle class incomes. In response to the deepening capitalist crisis, it has sought to uphold and expand its privileges by developing a vast network of corporatist and tripartite ties with big business and the state, including through the development of multi-billion-dollar union investment funds.

The reason Fightback cannot and will not lay bare the social interests of the union bureaucracy is because it speaks for sections of the privileged upper middle class.

Thus, for Fightback, the decline of the stifling grip enjoyed by the unions over the working class is something to be mourned and actively combatted, rather than welcomed and politically encouraged by intensifying the struggle to build new, genuine organizations of working class struggle. Their June 15 article laments, "unionization rates have been declining for decades. While the situation is not as bad as in the United States, where only 10.3 per cent of workers are unionized, the unionization rate in Canada has dropped from 37.6 per cent in 1981 to 30.9 per cent in 2021."

The article goes on to hail the ostensibly "independent" Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which won an election to represent Amazon workers at its Staten Island, New York, facility on the basis of promises to improve wages and workplace benefits. "The inspiring victory won by the independent Amazon Labor Union" was a "David-and-Goliath victory" that "sparked a wave of inspiration around the world," Fightback enthused.

Fightback neglects to inform its readers that after its "victory," the ALU and its leader, Chris Smalls, rapidly ditched their "independent" posturing. Smalls rushed off to Washington for meetings with top AFL-CIO bureaucrats and US President Joe Biden. Biden has declared himself a "pro-union" president and established a high-powered task force to promote unionization. This is because he views the unions as crucial to suppressing the class struggle, while his administration wages war on Russia, intensifies Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, allows workers' incomes to be slashed by price rises, and supports the Federal Reserve in countering inflation by driving up unemployment. Following Smalls' trip to Washington, the ALU's subsequent attempt to win representation at another New York facility went down to a crushing defeat.

Fightback's focus on encouraging Amazon unionization takes place as the retail giant is implementing a massive expansion of its Canadian operations. The company announced the establishment of an additional four facilities across Ontario in April, adding a further 4,500 employees to its workforce. Amazon opened 15 sites across the province in 2021 alone, and now has over 50 nationwide. Fightback and their Teamster allies are determined to bring this rapidly growing, highly exploited and increasingly militant workforce under their political control to prevent Amazon workers from taking their place in the front rank of the struggle against capitalist exploitation.

Fightback's cheerleading for the ALU, like its endorsement of the Teamsters, is a product of the petty-bourgeois, anti-working class political tradition it defends. This organization—whose cadre function as factions inside the pro-war, pro-austerity NDP and Québec Solidaire, a self-described pro-indépendentiste "citizens' party"—traces its roots back to a British-based group led by Ted Grant that split from the Fourth International in the late 1940s.

The Grant group subsequently became among the most vociferous

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promoters of Pabloism, which the ICFI was formed to fight in 1953. Adapting to the post-Second World War restabilization of capitalism, the Pabloites wrote off the working class as an independent revolutionary force. Renouncing the program of the Fourth International, they argued that the Stalinist bureaucracy, the bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonial countries, and the trade unions and the social democratic parties in the West could and would be transformed under mass pressure into the vehicles of socialist transformation.

The British Trotskyists did intervene systematically in the Labour Party and the trade unions during the 1950s and 1960s. They did so with the aim of helping the most politically advanced workers, who continued to lend these organizations their active support, to grasp the counter-revolutionary character of the labour bureaucracies, and thereby lay the foundation for the building of an independent revolutionary party capable of leading the working class to power.

By contrast, Grant and his followers developed "entryism" as a permanent strategic orientation. Their efforts were aimed not at politically educating workers through a struggle against the pro-capitalist bureaucracies, but to pressure these bureaucracies to the "left" and gain influence within them.

To this day, the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) and Fightback are adamant that the workers and youth must remain oriented to, and trapped within, the unions and social democracy. Indeed, the IMT was established by Ted Grant and his disciple Alan Woods in 1993, after support for the British Labour Party and trade unions had collapsed as a result of their never-ending betrayals, with the express aim of upholding their perspective that the Labour Party must remain the predominant arena of political struggle for "socialism."

In keeping with this anti-working class orientation, the IMT was among the foremost promoters of Jeremy Corbyn's attempt to resuscitate the Labour Party on a tepid national-reformist program, after he was unexpectedly catapulted into the party leadership in 2015 by workers and youth seeking a means to fight austerity and war. Whilst the IMT cheered him on and Fightback urged that the NDP be "Corbynized," Corbyn capitulated to the right-wing, including by declaring his support for Britain's nuclear weapons program and instructing Labour councils to impose austerity. After four years of cowardly retreats, he handed the party back to the control of the hated Blairites led by Keir Starmer.

Fightback as the "left" flank of the Liberal/NDP/trade union alliance

Fightback is among the most devoted of Grant and Woods' acolytes on the global stage. Its cadres are fully paid-up members of the NDP, which it shamelessly promotes as a "workers' party," based on its institutional ties to the trade unions.

It has continued to promote the lie that the NDP can be transformed into an instrument to "fight for socialism" as the social democrats have backed Canadian imperialism's involvement in one US-led war after another—from Yugoslavia and Afghanistan to Libya—and have enforced austerity policies and "balanced budgets" whenever they have come to power at the provincial level.

The New Democrats fully back the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, which threatens to spiral into a direct clash between nuclear powers. This support has found its clearest expression in their entering a formal "confidence-and-supply" agreement with the Liberal government last March with the explicit goal of providing "political stability" to the Canadian bourgeoisie until June 2025. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is using this "political stability" to supply Ukraine with hundreds of millions of dollars of heavy weaponry to wage war with Russia, modernize the North American Aerospace Defence Command, and expand a massive rearmament program worth tens of billions of dollars.

To pay for waging war abroad and boost the "competitive position" of Canadian capital amid an ever-deepening economic crisis, Trudeau's Liberals and his NDP allies are likewise committed to imposing savage austerity and inflation-driven real wage cuts on the working class at home.

To enforce this agenda, they are both relying on the trade unions to suppress mounting working class opposition, imposing concession contracts and isolating and strangling strikes when they can't prevent them from breaking out. One example of this is the unions' repeated resort in recent months to binding arbitration to short-circuit workers' struggles.

Fightback's role is to keep the working class under the political control of the trade unions and the NDP, by corralling workers into vain efforts to "make them fight" and employing "left" and "Marxist" rhetoric to excuse and cover up their betrayals.

Fightback's bemoaning of the decline in union membership and urgent call for "unionizing the non-unionized" resembles nothing so much as Trudeau's insistence, now echoed by Biden and his "Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment," of the need to strengthen the trade unions.

For Trudeau "partnering" with the unions has been a priority since he first came to power in November 2015. Just days after being sworn in as prime minister, Trudeau became the first Prime Minister in five decades to address a meeting of the Canadian Labour Congress executive and the heads of its principal affiliates. In an interview soon after, Trudeau asserted, "Canadians need to know that unions matter. They need to know that unions are essential in the fight for fair wages. Canadians need a government, which instead of attacking unions, works with them to ensure that every Canadian has a real and fair chance at success."

The intervening six years have demonstrated what this Liberal/union/NDP alliance means in practice. The unions supported the Liberal government in renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement so as to establish a more protectionist trade bloc to advance the interests of corporate Canada around the world and lay the economic basis for US and Canadian imperialism to wage war against their geostrategic rivals.

The unions and NDP worked hand-in-hand with Trudeau's Liberals to impose the "profits before life" pandemic policy, bailing out the banks and big business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, and keeping schools and businesses open as the deadly virus ran rampant so there was no interruption to the flow of corporate profits. This homicidal policy has officially claimed the lives of over 43,500 Canadians.

And now, as the threat of world war grows with every passing day and the working class enters into mass struggles over the rising cost of living that are ever-more directly posing the need for a political fight against the entire social order, the Canadian ruling elite's traditional preferred party of government has established a government alliance with the NDP, with the unions' enthusiastic support, to strengthen their collaboration in defending the interests of Canadian imperialism and suppressing the working class.

Fightback's shameless promotion of the Teamsters at Amazon underscores that it is the "left" flank of the Liberal/NDP/union alliance. Its key tasks are to strengthen the authority of the rotten unions at the very point where workers are beginning to break free from the straitjacket these pro-capitalist organizations have imposed upon them for decades and prevent workers from taking up a political struggle by claiming that "militant" trade unionism will suffice to push the NDP and union bureaucracy to the "left."

This is epitomized in Fightback's response to the now more than five-month-old union-backed Liberal-NDP "confidence-and-supply"

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agreement. To date, Fightback has published just a single article that discusses in any substantive way this anti-working class governmental alliance and it implications for the class struggle.

In that article, published March 22, Fightback leader Alex Grant placed on record his group's formal opposition to the deal between Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh. He did so, however, from the standpoint that Singh gained "very little" in his negotiations with Trudeau, resulting in a "weak sauce" agreement—not that it is a flagrant betrayal of the class independence of the working class to prop up any capitalist government. Let alone one committed to waging imperialist war and austerity.

While Grant gave Singh a slap on the wrist for his poor negotiating skills, he was completely silent on the unions' enthusiastic support for the NDP deal to keep the Trudeau government in office until June 2025. Five months on, one would continue to search the Fightback website in vain for any criticisms of the union bureaucracy's role as architects and pillars of the NDP-Liberal governmental alliance.

Significantly, much of Grant's article was given over to elaborating the conditions under which Fightback would support a Liberal/NDP alliance. He specifically cited Fightback's support for the NDP's decision to back the Paul Martin minority Liberal government's 2005 budget. Then NDP leader Jack Layton pompously termed this budget "the first NDP budget" because of a few modest social spending increases that the NDP had obtained in exchange for keeping the Liberals in office. Needless to say, these increases did nothing to reverse the devastating impact of the cuts to public and social services Martin had imposed as Chretien's finance minister, between 1994 and 2002. Even more tellingly, the budget endorsed by Fightback in 2005 and today some 17 years later included a $12.8 billion military spending increase over five years, the largest in two decades.

The struggle for improved working conditions at Amazon and throughout all sectors of the economy, and against imperialist war and austerity can only go forward through the mobilization of the independent political power of the working class. To unleash this power, workers must build workplace rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the pro-corporate trade unions, and fight to unify their struggles with workers around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

As a key element in this fight, workers must resolutely oppose the Liberal/NDP/trade union alliance, and those like the pseudo-left Fightback group who politically cover up for it and serve as the publicists, attorneys, and recruiting agents for the labour bureaucracies that are its pillars.

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