

Ten years since the formation of Canada's Unifor union: A political balance sheet

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On August 31, 2013, Unifor—dubbed a “super-union” by its proponents—was officially founded through a merger of the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP). The merger brought the total membership of the now fused organization to more than 300,000, making it far and away the country's largest industrial union.

The well-paid functionaries who negotiated the merger and the pseudo-left promoters and apologists of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy claimed that Unifor's birth marked a new dawn of “militant,” “social justice” trade unionism. A Unifor scheme to collect credit-card fees and potentially dues money from a new category of “members” at locations where it was not the accredited bargaining agent and from the jobless was touted as demonstrating its innovative approach to union “organizing” and readiness to organize the unemployed.

The reality was very different. As the *World Socialist Web Site* presciently warned at the time, the founding of Unifor was a “bureaucratic maneuver.” It was aimed at “shoring up the union apparatus under conditions where the authority and influence of the unions have been enormously eroded as a result of their decades of betrayals.” The new union, it continued, “offers nothing more for the workers trapped inside the new organization than continuing concession-laden contracts, speed-up, layoffs and the craven collaboration of union officials with company managements and big-business governments.”

This warning has been more than confirmed over the past decade. Unifor has emerged as a key pillar of support for the big business pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government, facilitating a sharp lurch to the right in official Canadian politics, and has presided over one concessions-filled contract after another for its members in auto, manufacturing, rail and various service industries.

Austerity for workers, billions for militarism and war

Around 1,000 major and petty union officials gathered in mid-August in Halifax in an orgy of self-congratulation at Unifor's “diamond anniversary” Canadian Council conference. But all the bombastic speeches, slick video presentations and late-night revelries at the hotel bars and buffets cannot conceal the fact that as the capitalist crisis intensifies and the working class is driven into ever broader struggles, workers are coming into headlong conflict with the bureaucrats who head Unifor and the entire union apparatus.

One does not need to look very hard for why. The first 10 years of the “super union” are littered with a continuing trail of bitter defeats. The Unifor bureaucracy has presided over the sellout of powerful struggles by refinery workers in Regina, Dominion grocery workers in Newfoundland, GM CAMI workers in Ingersoll, aircraft workers at De Havilland, salt

miners in Windsor, Metro food warehouse and now grocery retail workers in Toronto, not to mention the round after round of concessions imposed by the Detroit Three on autoworkers with Unifor's connivance.

Unifor has been complicit in and positively championed divisive two-tier, and now even three-tier, workforces. Defined benefits pensions have been surrendered across the board, wages continually fall behind inflation, working conditions deteriorate and even the eight-hour day is now a thing of the past in many factories.

Workers roundly reject miserable contracts that are enthusiastically recommended and hailed as “historic” by their union officials. When the bureaucrats are forced by rebellious memberships to sanction strike action, workers are left isolated on their picket lines until they “see sense” and are bullied into accepting contracts virtually identical to those previously rejected.

In pursuit of this pro-company agenda, Unifor participates in a series of permanent and ad hoc tripartite partnerships with representatives of big business and government aimed at boosting corporate “competitiveness” and investment. One example of this is the Canada Automotive Partnership Council, which includes representatives from Unifor, the auto giants, and the federal Liberal and Ontario and Quebec governments.

Unifor has developed a close political partnership with the big business, pro-war Trudeau government, and until its defeat in the 2018 Ontario election was a champion of the province's Liberal government. As the *Globe and Mail* has repeatedly noted, Ontario's Wynne Liberal government pursued “austerity” even more vigorously than the current Tory government led by Doug Ford.

Two years after its founding, Unifor played a leading role in helping bring the Liberals to power with the 2015 “Anybody but Conservative” campaign, which lauded the war-monger Justin Trudeau as a “progressive” candidate for Prime Minister. Unifor and its first president Jerry Dias acted as a semi-official Trudeau government adviser during the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was aimed at consolidating an American-dominated continental trade bloc to allow North America's twin imperialist powers to pursue their aggressive economic, geopolitical, and military ambitions around the world against their main rivals, above all Russia and China. Now, with the Liberals having joined the US-led war on Russia, Unifor is serving, together with its allies in the New Democratic Party (NDP), as a key source of support for the Liberal government.

There is nothing especially exceptional about Unifor's record. The union bureaucracy as a whole has followed the same course, exemplified by the close working relationship between the Canadian Labour Congress and the Trudeau government. For services rendered to the ruling elite, former CLC president Hassan Yussuff was appointed by Trudeau to the Senate, Canada's upper house of parliament.

The union bureaucracy advocates a “North America First” economic protectionist strategy based on a strengthening of Canadian capitalism's decades-long alliance with US imperialism. Unifor and the CLC unions

also championed the ruling class' back-to-work campaign during the pandemic, which protected corporate profits while endangering the health and very lives of millions of workers and their families.

The Unifor leadership has not batted so much as an eyelid at the all-party promotion of the US led proxy war in Ukraine and Canada's deepening war preparations against China. On the contrary, it has given full-throated support to the Liberals' rearmament program, with its only quibble being that the government should rely more on Canadian companies for major military contracts rather than purchasing weaponry from abroad.

Trudeau's 2017 Defence Policy Review initiated a massive 70 percent increase in military spending over the subsequent 10 years. But even this was not enough. Hopping on the current NATO war wagon, the Liberals have further lifted military spending commitments to equal 2 percent of GDP—a sum more than \$7 billion greater than the \$47 billion Ottawa transfers annually to the provinces to fund Medicare.

Unifor's support for Canadian imperialism and militarism has been among its hallmarks since its creation. During the 2015 election campaign, then Unifor president Jerry Dias infamously took NDP leader Thomas Mulcair to task for his mild criticism of a \$15 billion Canadian government-backed arms contract to Saudi Arabia, under which a London, Ontario General Dynamics plant supplies the despotic regime with armoured vehicles. Unifor, which counts the workers at the plant among its members, ordered Mulcair to keep his mouth shut about the deal, which was finalized under the Trudeau Liberal government. The Saudi regime has used the vehicles to suppress internal dissent, and reports indicate that they may also have been deployed in Riyadh's brutal US-backed war on Yemen.

Only weeks before the union's 10th anniversary celebrations, Unifor President Lana Payne and a coterie of Atlantic Region union officials toured the Irving shipyards in Halifax and gushed over the "meaningful" contribution it is making to strengthening the Royal Canadian Navy. This was soon followed by an op-ed column in the neo-conservative *National Post* from the head of the Unifor local at the shipyard. Shannon Sampson, trumpeting her pride in contributing to the building of Canada's new fleet of warships.

The nationalist-corporatist roots of the Unifor bureaucracy's pro-war, anti-worker record

Front and center at Unifor's 10th anniversary celebrations was a doubling down on the reactionary nationalist and pro-corporate perspective upon which the union was founded. Payne, the successor to the recently disgraced Dias, used the occasion to push the union's "Charting our own Course" campaign. This virulently nationalist slogan, aimed deliberately at ramming a wedge between Canadian and American autoworkers who are exploited by the same globally operating auto giants, is the bureaucracy's motto for the ongoing auto contract negotiations for workers at the Detroit Three's operations in Canada.

The global auto companies, including the Detroit Three in Canada and the United States, are waging a major onslaught on the workers who labour in their factories. The developing switch-over to Electric Vehicle production, the auto bosses are demanding, must be paid for by further reducing labour costs in the factories. However, for the first time since 1999, workers in Canada and the US are fighting for new contracts at the same time. On September 14, contracts covering 150,000 United Auto Workers (UAW) members at the Detroit Three companies will expire. Four days later, contracts with the same employers expire for 18,000 Unifor members in Canada.

But rather than mobilizing workers in a joint struggle against the Detroit Three on both sides of the border, Unifor is pumping out the same nationalist poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations. Addressing the fact that both Canadian and American auto contracts are coming up at the same time, Dave Cassidy, the Unifor Local 444 president for Windsor Stellantis workers, spoke for the entire leadership when he told reporters earlier this year that the union's strategy of offering more concessions than the American UAW will continue.

"We're both going in at the same time," said Cassidy. "The fact of the matter is that if it comes down to product, I can play nice in the sandbox right until the facts come that it's between us and the UAW—then the gloves go off."

Payne and her various lieutenants agree. Payne has extolled the 1985 split with the UAW and the founding of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) as "the best decision that we could have possibly made." For these bureaucrats, the militant joint cross-border battles of autoworkers that organized workers in one international union and won significant gains in the 1930s and 1940s constitute a history that must be banished and forgotten.

The CAW was founded in 1985 on the basis of a reactionary "made in Canada" nationalist program that divided North American workers and prevented a joint struggle against concessions and jobs cuts in opposition to the right-wing UAW leadership. Under conditions of the globalization of production, the splitting of North American autoworkers along national lines by the UAW and CAW bureaucracies handed a golden opportunity to the Big Three auto companies to "whipsaw" contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border.

The CAW based its collaboration with the employers on the labor cost advantages the automakers enjoyed due to a weak Canadian dollar and state-funded health care. This "advantage" has since been eliminated through savage wage and benefit cuts in the US, leading to an intensified "race to the bottom" in which the CAW/Unifor and the equally rotten and corrupt UAW have competed to offer the Detroit Three the most favourable terms of exploitation.

The evolution of Unifor and the UAW into junior partners of the auto bosses is part of a universal process, rooted in the globalization of production. The development of globally integrated production completely undermined the old bureaucratic labour organizations, which were rooted in the national economy and the national labour market. Under conditions where transnational corporations could shift production to virtually any country in search of cheaper labour, the unions, already thoroughly bureaucratized, sought to defend their financial and institutional interests by pressuring their members to work harder for less.

By boosting investor profit and ensuring employers' "global competitiveness," that is, profitability, they have sought to persuade corporations to continue to "do business" with the union bureaucracy and maintain a modicum of production within the national borders. With the transition to EVs, this process is being taken to a new level, with Unifor and the UAW cheering on the provision of tens of billions of dollars in government handouts to the highly profitable auto manufacturers with the absurd claim that this is the only way to "defend jobs."

Over the past four decades, the unions have ceased to function even as defensive organizations of the working class. They are utterly hostile, as attested by the virtual cessation of strikes, to any form of class struggle; have embraced economic nationalism; and integrated themselves ever more fully with corporate management and the state.

On this basis, the most disgusting forms of corruption have developed in the relations between the union leaderships, corporate bosses, and government ministers. This includes the downfall of Dias, who accepted kickbacks to market COVID PPE kits. In the UAW, a dozen top officials, including two past presidents, have been convicted and jailed for taking company bribes in exchange for signing pro-company sweetheart deals

and embezzling millions in members' dues money. Far from "cleaning" up the UAW, the federal intervention into the union sanctioned a rigged election that led to the installation of another long-time bureaucrat, Shawn Fain.

The answer to these developments lies in workers building new organizations of class struggle and basing their struggles on an internationalist socialist strategy. In opposition to the transnational corporations and the ruling elite's pursuit of ever-greater profits on a world scale through war and intensified exploitation, workers must unify their struggles across borders and continents and challenge the subordination of society to the dictatorship of big business by fighting for what workers need, not what the corporations claim they can afford.

This requires the construction of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace to seize control from the nationalist and pro-corporate union bureaucracy, and place power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

These committees must develop lines of communication with workers across national borders, creating the basis for united action by workers in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and internationally in defence of jobs, wages, working conditions, and in opposition to war and austerity.

The organizational framework and political leadership necessary for such a fight is being developed by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Autoworkers in the United States have already begun to build their own rank-and-file committees in opposition to the UAW bureaucracy that has presided over decades of concessions contracts, all the while gorging themselves on bribes and kickbacks from the corporations.

The movement to organize workers independently of all the union bureaucracies is growing amid a general uprising of workers across the globe against ever-more brutal attacks on their living standards. Unifor's ruthless imposition of the dictates of the corporate elite and support for pro-war, pro-austerity governments during the first 10 years of its existence provides more than enough reason for Canadian workers to join this global rebellion against the union bureaucracy and take up the struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force fighting for workers' power.



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