

Unifor's Lana Payne: A “reform” union bureaucrat or rancid wine packaged in a new bottle

Carl Bronski
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A little over one year ago at Unifor's August 2022 leadership convention, Lana Payne beat Jerry Dias' hand-picked successor, Scott Doherty, and Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy in the race for the union's presidency. Flush with her second ballot victory, Payne was celebrated by the assembled corporate media and the identity politics crusaders of the pseudo-left as Unifor's “first female president,” a “progressive” who could bring a “softer, more collegial” approach to the faction ridden union bureaucracy.

During the campaign, Payne cast herself as an “outsider” with the self-proclaimed clean pair of hands needed to rid the union of the stench of a seedy COVID test kit kickback scandal that had exposed long-time president Dias as a scheming pandemic profiteer and attempted witness tamperer. Declared Payne at the conclusion of the 2022 convention, “We can have a fighting transparent democratic union. We can build this union stronger, and we will, all of us together.”

Thirteen months later, what is left of Payne and her team's heady promises? Mired today in her own festering scandal around a deeply suspect ratification vote for the new “pattern” agreement for autoworkers at Ford Canada, Payne and the union bureaucracy as a whole are once again exposed as little more than the police force for the auto bosses against the strivings of the rank-and-file membership.

With Ford workers pressing for a strike to take advantage of the simultaneous expiration of auto contracts in the United States and Canada that could initiate a powerful international offensive against the Detroit Three auto companies by uniting workers in a common struggle, Payne insisted that Unifor would “chart our own course.”

This nationalist “course,” standing squarely in the tradition of Dias and his predecessors in the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW), focused above all on blocking a joint struggle by Canadian and American autoworkers, whose contracts expired September 14. Determined to prevent Canadian Ford workers from joining the limited strike sanctioned by the UAW bureaucracy south of the border, Payne orchestrated the bureaucratic suppression of the September 18 strike deadline previously voted for by the membership. The Unifor leadership unilaterally and arbitrarily extended the contract for another day and subsequently announced a sell-out agreement with Ford that, once revealed, met with stiff

resistance from the membership.

Payne took no chances. Unifor kept even the most basic details of the agreement under wraps for more than three-and-a-half days, with their release coming only hours before the ratification vote began. The one and only contract ratification meeting was held online, so as to prevent workers from collectively discussing the way forward free of bureaucratic surveillance and interference. The full contract was never presented. Only cherry-picked “highlights.” Voting took place by email and was open for less than 24 hours.

Payne's braggadocio about negotiating a “historic, life-changing” collective agreement, dutifully echoed by the lower tiers of the bureaucracy, was nevertheless met with derision by a restive and combative rank-and-file determined to put an end to concessions. And rightly so. The three-year agreement—which Unifor now intends to make the “pattern” for similar sellouts at GM Canada and Stellantis—contained a meager 15 percent wage “increase” over the life of the contract, perpetuates the hated multi-tier wage system and provides no job security under conditions where the automakers intend to use the transition to electric vehicle production to slash jobs wholesale.

Union officials, sensing a possible rejection of the contract, reportedly resorted to voter manipulation by organizing for temporary part time workers (TPTs) to be encouraged to register for an electronic ballot on Saturday evening, despite their having missed Unifor's registration deadline for all workers. The emails sought to encourage the poorly paid TPTs to vote “Yes” by dangling a \$4,000 signing bonus as an incentive. Meanwhile, workers who no longer were employed by the company have reported they received online access to vote while other workers entitled to vote found they could not cast their ballot.

The following morning, Unifor, in a brief statement, announced that the contract had “passed.” No figures were initially given. Only after workers exploded in outrage at the lack of any vote results did Unifor admit that only 54 percent had voted for the deal. However, they refused to provide an actual vote breakdown. How did each plant vote? How many workers actually voted? How many workers were not provided with voting access? From the union officialdom, not a peep.

By the following day, the reasons behind Unifor's reluctance to break down the vote became even clearer, when it was revealed

that the skilled trades had actually voted down the contract. In violation of a 1988 union procedural letter of understanding that no Detroit Three contract can be passed until both skilled trades and production workers ratify a tentative agreement, the union's leadership simply stated that the decades-long accepted procedure to safeguard union trades is suddenly irrelevant and will be retroactively struck from the union's books at a forthcoming meeting of the National Executive Board.

So much for Payne's "fighting, transparent, democratic union."

In reality, Payne is a creature of the same bureaucratic layer as the disgraced and defrocked Jerry Dias.

She began her climb through the various union bureaucracies in 1991 as a 17-year-long official in the Fisheries, Food and Allied Workers union—affiliated at the time to the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW)—before moving for six years to the presidency of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour.

Payne served as Unifor's national Secretary-Treasurer under Dias' leadership team, starting in 2019, having previously served a six-year stint as Atlantic Regional Director. As such, she faithfully supported Unifor's corporatist alliance with big business and close political partnership with the federal Liberal government.

She stepped in as Unifor's acting president when Dias was forced in February-March 2022 to take a leave of absence, then resign due to the kickback scandal. She did her best to entirely cover up the scandal, putting out various lies, including that Dias was stepping back for medical reasons and no financial improprieties were involved. When leaks to the press made that impossible, Payne worked with the National Executive Board to sanitize and fence-off the affair as best they could. Ultimately, Payne and the rest of the Unifor top brass struck a sordid deal with Dias that saw him go off into a gilded retirement, funded by workers' dues, without official union censure or criminal proceedings.

In the midst of the Dias scandal and in the immediate run-up to the August 2022 Unifor convention that selected Payne as his successor, leaks to the press revealed the lavish five-star expense accounts of 17 leading Unifor officials, including Payne. Dias' expenses topped the group, reaching \$317,000 in 2018 and \$280,000 the following year. Scott Doherty's expenses fell just short of Dias' payouts during those years. Payne also racked up six-figure expenses in 2018 and 2019 before ascending to the \$170,000 per year (before expenses) top job.

The Unifor bureaucracy's treachery against the workers, which finds expression in rampant corruption, is rooted in its nationalist and pro-corporate agenda. The union leadership is integrated with the auto bosses and government ministers through various tripartite corporatist bodies. These bodies helped "reorganize" the auto industry in 2008-9—that is restore its profitability for investors through massive concessions and job cuts—and they are playing a major role in the imposition of a transition to electric vehicle production that will be carried through at the expense of autoworkers. This could include the loss of up to 40 percent of all auto jobs. Imposing this unpopular agenda in the face of worker opposition requires the use of the most unscrupulous methods, which Payne has proven more than willing to employ.

As the lead organizer of last year's convention, Payne proved

her pro-government, pro-corporate credentials by inviting big business Liberal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan as a keynote speaker. O'Regan would subsequently use draconian state powers to dictate a contract to over 7,000 west coast dockers in July 2023. Like the rest of the union bureaucracy, the Payne-led Unifor apparatus is a fervent supporter of the US-Canada-NATO-instigated war against Russia and the Liberal government's plans to spend hundreds of billion on high-tech weapon systems, including a new fleet of warships and warplanes. Only weeks before the union's 10th anniversary celebrations in Halifax this past August, 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.

Only months after ascending to the Unifor presidency, Payne played a major role in heading off an incipient Ontario-wide general strike against the Conservative government of Doug Ford when Ford moved to bypass the Federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms and criminalize an impending strike by 55,000 provincial education workers. With hundreds of thousands of workers ready to walk off the job against Ford's fiat, Payne led a group of union leaders in a frenzied weekend campaign to convince Ford to withdraw his anti-worker legislation in return for an immediate end to the strike by the education workers organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Payne's record in her first year as president has set new lows for misrepresentation, abject surrender and betrayal of militant offensives waged by her own membership. Significant strikes last year at Metro Toronto wholesale grocery warehouses and this year at Windsor Salt and Greater Toronto Metro retail grocery stores all showed workers roundly rejecting miserable tentative contracts enthusiastically endorsed by Payne and Unifor.

This week's revelation that the Unifor bureaucracy violated its own internal procedures by declaring its sellout contract with Ford Canada ratified despite the opposition of skilled trades workers is a further glaring demonstration that for Payne, like Dias before her, the suppression of workers' struggles to safeguard the profitability of the employers is "job number one" for these junior partners of the corporations. It underscores that autoworkers must urgently seize control of their contract struggle from the union apparatus by building rank-and-file committees to place power back where it belongs, on the shop floor.



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