

At Biden's behest, Canada's Labour Minister convenes meeting with US ambassador and top union leaders

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At the explicit request of US President Joe Biden, Canadian Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan and the US Ambassador to Canada, David L. Cohen, held a roundtable discussion in Ottawa last month with current and former representatives of some of Canada's largest unions and the Canadian Labour Congress. According to an X/Twitter post by Cohen, the meeting focused on the "strengths and opportunities of labor relations in the United States and Canada."

"[US President Joe Biden] wants to know what do we have in common, what problems do we have in common? What solutions do we have in common and where can we work more closely in a bilateral way?" O'Regan told iPolitics. "It was very stimulating."

Those who attended the Feb. 14 meeting with O'Regan and Cohen included Senator Hassan Yussuff, who served as president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) for seven years, ending in 2021, and was promoted to Canada's upper house of parliament by Trudeau for services rendered to the bourgeoisie; current CLC Secretary-Treasurer Lilly Chang; Teamsters Canada President François Laporte; Unifor President Lana Payne; and SEIU Healthcare's chief lobbyist Michael Spitale, a former president of the Ontario Liberal Party.

Yussuff declared of the meeting, "Today's roundtable represents the importance of our governments and labour working together for the prosperity of our two nations." Unifor said in a tweet that Payne had participated "to discuss the economy, the important work of unions in building good jobs & strong communities, and upcoming challenges & opportunities for organized labour."

Beyond these boilerplate statements, details of the discussion remain scant. A request by the WSWS to O'Regan's office for more information on what was discussed at the meeting has so far gone unanswered.

Suppressing the class struggle for profits and war

Held at the behest of the Biden administration, this meeting should be taken as a warning by workers across North America. After a year in which workers took significant action, and strained to escape the grip of the pro-employer trade unions, efforts are underway at the highest levels of the Canadian and American state to work even more closely with the corrupt bureaucratic union apparatuses to suppress the class struggle in 2024.

Furthermore, the governments on both sides of the border are working with the unions to subordinate workers to their wars and to suppress opposition to the slashing of living standards to pay for massive military funding increases.

The unions in Canada, like the unions in the US, are systematically working to divide workers along national lines as the Canadian bourgeoisie collaborates ever more closely with US imperialism in pursuit of its own predatory interests. Canada has played a key role in providing billions of dollars in aid, weapons and training to Ukraine in the US-NATO war against Russia. However this is seen as just a down payment with increasing demands from the Canadian ruling class that even more resources be dedicated to the war effort and to preparing for war with China.

Canadian union leaders are keenly aware of the Canadian economy's significance for the US military industrial base, including the extraction and refining of strategic minerals and the production of key arms components in facilities throughout the country. The union bureaucracy went to bat for the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 2017 when President Donald Trump threatened to scuttle it, arguing that Canada is integral to US national security.

Less than two weeks after his meeting with the union leaders, Ambassador Cohen pressed Ottawa to increase its military funding, warning, "NATO and the world is watching what Canada is doing with respect to its commitment (to dramatically raise defence spending). ... It's not something we've imposed on Canada. But the world is watching." Canada currently spends 1.38 percent of GDP on its military, a figure which is well short of the 2 percent target set by NATO and has been derided by the corporate media as "miserly." Tens of billions would have to be slashed from social spending annually to reach the NATO target, a proposition which would be met by powerful popular opposition in the working class.

According to Statistics Canada, through October, more than 2.2 million person-days of work were lost to strikes in 2023, the highest number in nearly two decades. This does not include the Common Front strike by Quebec public sector workers which saw nearly half a million hospital workers, nurses, teachers, school board support staff and other state employees walk off the job for a week last December. Across industries, workers have taken action in a fight against surging inflation and declining living standards, only to be sold out in every case by the union bureaucracies working in close coordination with the Trudeau Liberal and other big-business governments.

Significant worker struggles last year included:

- A strike by 159,000 federal workers last spring;
- A 41-day strike by 1,400 workers against National Steel Car, which saw workers establish a rank-and-file committee to fight an eventual sellout by the United Steelworkers;
- Strike action by 7,400 British Columbia dockworkers that disrupted shipping across North America for much of July;
- An eight-day walkout by 350 St. Lawrence Seaway workers, which

was terminated when Unifor, acting at the behest of the federal government, ordered the workers to return to work without a contract;

• The contract fight against the Detroit Three automakers in the fall, where Unifor ran roughshod over workers' democratic rights at Ford and called phony hours-long "strikes" at GM and Stellantis to force through sellout contracts amid a simultaneous contract expiration and strike in the US.

These strikes had the potential to impact production in the United States and to expand across the border to workers in the same unions and industries. How the Trudeau government and the unions handled them was being keenly watched from Washington, where Biden partnered closely with UAW President Shawn Fain to ensure the sellout of the contract struggle of the 150,000 autoworkers at the Detroit Three's US operations.

O'Regan personally spearheaded the NDP-backed Liberal Trudeau government's charge against the 13-day strike by dockworkers in British Columbia, threatening to criminalize their action through back-to-work legislation or other means if they rejected a government-dictated sellout. Amid the strike, O'Regan met with US Acting Secretary of Labour Julie Su behind closed doors to consult on how to best handle the emerging rebellion of workers, underscoring the cross border conspiracy to suppress the strike, and the class struggle more broadly.

Ultimately, the strike was shut down with the connivance of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) leadership, which blocked the expansion of the strike to the US West Coast where port workers had been laboring for a year without a contract. O'Regan then promised to take action to effectively ban future port strikes, robbing workers of their right to strike.

EV production and a "war economy"

Other likely topics of discussion at the February 14 meeting would have been the role of Canada in the transition to electric vehicles (EV) and industrial policy.

Canadian imperialism is seeking to carve out a major role for itself in the EV supply chain, from the mining of the rare earth metals needed for batteries to the billion-dollar battery plants in various stages of construction and the transition of traditional vehicle assembly plants to EV production. There have been frictions between Ottawa and Washington over attracting EV investments. Nevertheless, US imperialism views Canada as pivotal to its plans to develop North American-anchored EV production chains, so it can compete economically and militarily with China, which currently dominates the EV market and supply chains. Unifor has backed federal and provincial governments opening the spigot of public funding to attract auto companies to set up shop or expand operations in Canada.

The Feb. 14 meeting would also have broached the question of how to control the increasingly restive working class in Mexico. Unifor, the UAW and the Teamsters have been leading the charge for new, supposedly "independent" unions under the USMCA, the renegotiated NAFTA, at auto plants in Mexico to replace the hated gangster unions with ones no less hostile to class struggle. While the unions make sure workers remain divided along national lines, the auto industry relies on the ready flow of auto parts and vehicles across North America's borders, a disruption caused by a parts shortage or strike in one country quickly impacts production in the others.

The Teamsters meanwhile play a key role in policing rail workers across the continent. The recent merger of Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern has extended the company's consolidated network from

Vancouver, BC in the west and Saint John, New Brunswick in the east all the way to ports in southern Mexico in Lazaro Cardenas and Veracruz. Approximately 9,300 workers at CPKC and Canadian National (CN) in Canada are currently in contract talks and could be in a legal position to strike by May.

Above all, the capitalist ruling class, and their political representatives and agents in the union bureaucracies aim to subordinate the working class to the expansion of imperialist war operations in Europe and Asia, which will require dramatically increased military spending at the expense of workers' living standards and the establishment of a "war economy" in which workers' resistance is systematically suppressed.

Toward that end, both Biden and Trudeau have worked to establish the closest ties with the trade union bureaucracy. Biden has declared himself the "most pro-union president in American history," and was welcomed as such by UAW President Fain when he made a brief appearance on a UAW picket line in Detroit last year.

Similarly, the Trudeau government has been working to draw the union bureaucracies ever closer to the state as Canadian imperialism seeks to shore up its global "competitive" and strategic position through austerity and inflation-driven real wage cuts at home and aggression and war abroad. In December, O'Regan established a union roundtable of 14 labour leaders headed by CLC President Bea Bruske to advise the government on automation, energy transition and worker shortages.

"Ever since I became Minister of Labour I've heard from unions time and again that they want a seat at the table. ... They want a seat at the table where the decisions are made, where the big challenges are faced," O'Regan told reporters at the time. "I've always said workers will have a lot more than a seat at the table. They will lead it. They will lead the table."

To fight against job cuts, declining living standards, rising inequality and war, the last thing that workers need is more "seats at the table" for privileged upper-middle class bureaucrats. Rather, they must assert their own independent interests, which are in direct opposition to the pro-big business and pro-war policies pursued by the Liberals with the full backing of the NDP and the union bureaucracies.

The unions in Canada and the US boost Biden and Trudeau as the most pro-union government leaders ever, even as they break strikes at home and wage war abroad. In Canada, the unions are key architects and pillars of the NDP-Liberal alliance, just as they are a main bulwark of the Democratic Party in the US. Over the past four decades, the nationalist union bureaucracies have embraced corporatism, integrating entirely into the state and big business. Under conditions of a looming world war and the deepening systemic crisis of the capitalist system, this process is being taken to an even higher level, with the unions increasingly abandoning any pretense of independence from the institutions of the capitalist ruling class. UAW President Fain was speaking for union bureaucrats everywhere when he blurted out in January that he was ready to "go to war" for Biden.

Against the cross-border conspiracy of the unions with the Biden and Trudeau administrations and the imperialist ruling classes of the US and Canada for whom they speak, workers must build rank-and-file committees in their workplaces and neighbourhoods. Such genuine organizations of class struggle will allow them to mobilise workers' immense social power independently of and in opposition to the bureaucratic union apparatuses and to unite across industries and borders with their brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and beyond. Above all, this means the fight for workers' control over socioeconomic life so that production and employment are organized to satisfy the social needs of the many, not enrich the few—socialism. This perspective is only being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International all over the world.



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