

Unifor bureaucrats rally round Ontario hard-right premier Doug Ford in province's "tariff war" election

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Facing the impending threat by the Trump administration of 25 percent tariffs on Canadian exports to the US, Ontario Premier Doug Ford has called a snap provincial election for February 27. By posturing as "Captain Canada" amid a deluge of nationalist propaganda from the entire political establishment and media, Ford and his right-wing Progressive Conservatives hope to secure a mandate based on cynical promises to defend "Canadian jobs" and workers' living standards. In reality, the Tories are pushing for a decisive majority to intensify the onslaught on workers' wages and conditions, and slash public services to make the working class pay for the costs of trade war and the deepening capitalist crisis.

Underscoring the accelerating march to the right of Canada's trade union bureaucracies, Unifor Local 1285—the bargaining agent for some 8,000 auto assembly and parts workers, transit operators, food processors and warehouse workers in Brampton, Ontario—has issued a statement endorsing Ford.

The Local 1285 endorsement marks the first time ever that a local of Unifor, the country's largest private-sector union, has backed a Conservative candidate, whether in a federal or provincial election. Indeed, for decades Unifor has pointed to the Tories' unabashed class war policies to justify its political suppression of the working class. At elections, it has called for "strategic voting" for the so-called "progressive" parties, the pro-austerity and pro-war Liberal and New Democratic Parties, and whenever there has been a hung parliament in Ottawa or at Queen's Park it has urged the NDP to prop up big business minority Liberal governments.

Unifor's Local 1285 endorsement should come as no surprise to autoworkers in southern Ontario. Prior to his being ousted due to his involvement in a Covid-kit kickback scheme, Unifor President Jerry Dias developed close ties to Ford, accepting appointment as the head of the premier's corporatist automotive task force, and appearing with him to promote the government's miserly 2021 increase in the minimum wage.

Last spring, Dave Cassidy, the longtime Unifor National Executive Board member, former president of the giant Unifor Local 444 in Windsor and defeated candidate for the national union presidency in Unifor's 2022 leadership election, retired to much fanfare and within weeks accepted an appointment to join the Doug Ford government as a Special Advisor to the Minister of Labour. Cassidy's move came little more than a year after Unifor played a key role in demobilizing an imminent province-wide general strike against the Ford government's unconstitutional attacks on 55,000 education workers' right-to-strike.

That treachery allowed the Ford government to regain its political footing and ultimately impose another brutal wage and job cutting contract in the schools, on both support workers and teachers.

Cassidy appeared alongside Ford at the launch of his re-election

campaign, held in Windsor on January 29. Later that day, Ford addressed what his campaign described as a group of Unifor Local 444 "members" at the union hall, in an event put together with the assistance of the current Local leadership.

Unifor bills itself and has been billed by a whole gamut of "progressive" liberal, social-democratic and pseudo-left forces as an engine for social and economic "justice." Of course, rank and file workers see it quite differently. They have for decades watched Unifor and its predecessors—the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Canadian Energy and Paperworkers (CEP)—act as the junior partners of the corporations in enforcing rotten, concessions contracts and job cuts to safeguard the interests of big business.

Unifor and its predecessors have promoted their electoral policy as an "ABC" strategy—that is to say, vote "Anybody But Conservative." Unifor played a major role, alongside other unions, in reviving the electoral fortunes of the federal Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred governing party for most of the past century. The Liberals had languished for a decade in the political wilderness before Unifor helped to catapult Justin Trudeau into the prime minister's seat in 2015.

For the past ten years, the Trudeau government—with the support of the NDP in parliament and the major union bureaucracies outside of it—has pursued much the same big business agenda as the hard-right Conservative Harper government that preceded it. It has imposed austerity, attacks on democratic rights, and a massive rearmament program, and integrated Canada ever more deeply into Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China, while giving full-throated support to Israel's genocidal "redrawing of the map" of the Middle East. The federal and provincial Liberals and NDP have been exposed as bitter enemies of the working class.

In his pledge of support for Premier Ford's re-election bid, Unifor Local 1285 President Vito Beato touted him as a "friend" of labour, who has shown "strong dedication to protecting our auto industry in Ontario, workers and their families." Beato, among many other things, failed to mention that currently about 3,000 of his own members at the Stellantis Brampton Assembly Plant are in their second year of layoff, as the transnational auto company retrenches its global combustion-engine auto production in preparation for repositioning itself a maker of electric vehicles (EVs).

David Piccini, Ford's Labour Minister, welcomed Unifor's first endorsement as a harbinger of things to come. "We're growing our labour coalition in a big way," he said. "The NDP have abandoned workers in these automotive towns, they're focused on issues that just aren't core to the fundamental concerns of workers, which is affordability, and ultimately their jobs and job protection—and that's where Premier Ford squarely is, when you look at the global threat that Donald Trump's tariffs

pose.”

Other unions and locals that have endorsed the Ford-led Progressive Conservatives (PCs) include the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LiUNA), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association (OPFFA) and the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB). In a social media post last week, Piccini claimed that the PCs have thus far secured 10 union endorsements.

Piccini’s centering of the Ford campaign squarely around the issue of Trump’s threats to impose punishing tariffs on Canadian goods is key to the Conservatives’ election strategy. With last month’s resignation of Prime Minister Trudeau and his proroguing of the federal parliament until March so a new Liberal leader can be selected, Ford quickly moved to portray himself as the most vociferous and energetic nationalist voice in the country—the “Captain Canada” who will defend Canadian manufacturers and resource-exporters and lead the fight against Trump’s tariff threats.

Of course, little is now being said about Ford’s enthusiasm for the election of Trump, with whom he shares many political affinities. These include exalting the police and military, indifference and hostility to democratic rights, and the courting and promotion of far-right forces.

Ford, it also need be noted, has combined complaints that Trump, with his tariff threats, “pulled a knife” on him, with calls for a “Fortress Am-Can” to fight China. Like the Canadian bourgeoisie as a whole, his only concern is to secure for Canadian imperialism what it considers its due as a junior partner of Washington and Wall Street.

The reactionary consequences of the nationalist break-up of the UAW

If sections of the Unifor bureaucracy now feel able to endorse Ford, it is because the bureaucracy approves of his rabid nationalism and views it as a means to secure its privileged social interests. Unifor’s predecessor, the CAW, arose in the nationalist 1985 split with the international United Auto Workers union based in Detroit.

The birth of the CAW in 1985 sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers and gave a huge opening for the Big Three auto companies to intensify their practice of “whipsawing” contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border to secure the lowest possible wages, benefits and employment levels.

The newly founded CAW was promoted by the middle-class “left” as a bastion of militancy, a supposedly progressive alternative to the “business unionism” practiced by American-based labour organizations. The balance sheet of the CAW’s breakaway from the UAW and its subsequent rebranding as Unifor shows something quite different and reveals the opposite of the union’s claim to represent a progressive alternative for workers.

In the years following the split, the CAW joined the UAW Solidarity House bureaucrats in repudiating any and all association with class struggle. It pressed workers to secure product placements and investment by offering the automakers the highest rate of return, and otherwise served as an auxiliary of management in meeting production and profit targets. This was accompanied by an unbridled promotion of chauvinism and protectionism, which has served to split the working class and rally workers behind one or another rival capitalist elite.

The increasingly nationalist, pro-company policies of the unions have proven utterly disastrous for workers and for communities dependent on the auto industry. Concessions have failed to “save” jobs, and each round of concessions has led to another. The globally organized corporations, aided and assisted by the unions, have used every fresh giveback as a “whipsaw” lever to press workers in another country or at another plant for still more. “Jobs to the lowest bidder” became the private watchword of the union bureaucracies in an ever spiralling “race to the bottom.”

The divisive split, suppressing the joint power of the working class on both sides of the border, has helped to pave the way for the present crisis over Trump’s tariff policies. Lana Payne, an effusive supporter of the big business federal Liberals and the current national president of Unifor, much like her counterparts throughout Canada’s union bureaucracies, responded to Trump’s announcement of a “pause” for 30 days in the implementation of 25 percent tariffs on all Canadian exports by urging workers to unite with the bosses and government for a tariff war to “save” Canada. Payne, who has joined Trudeau’s corporatist Council on Canada-US Relations alongside business leaders and ex-government ministers, added, “As a country, we must use the days ahead to continue to bring Canadians together, to continue to plan for a potential trade war, and to use every single lever we have to build a strong, resilient, and diverse economy.”

Workers across North America cannot defend their jobs and livelihoods amid an unfolding trade war—one moreover that is part of a developing imperialist world war—by lining up with their “own” ruling class. But this is precisely what they have been told to do by the union bureaucracies in the US and Canada, which have sought to outdo each other in nationalist slogan-mongering since the threat of tariffs was first raised. United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain has repeated Trump’s lying claims about tariffs protecting “American jobs.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has written:

In opposition to the union bureaucracies’ efforts to corral workers behind the competing ruling elites’ nationalist policies of trade war and military conflict, the working class in the United States, Canada and Mexico must chart their own common independent course.

They must join forces in a united movement of the North American working class, through the development of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). These committees will organize opposition to the demands of the ruling class for “sacrifices” in the form of mass job cuts, concessions and the evisceration of public services and social programs.

Opposition to trade war and its ruinous impacts on the working class must be infused with a socialist internationalist program, key tenets of which are opposition to imperialist war and anti-immigrant chauvinism.



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