

Buzz Hargrove and the rotten corporatist legacy of the Canadian Auto Workers—Part 1

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This is the first part of a two part article. The second part can be found [here](#).

Basil “Buzz” Hargrove, a career union bureaucrat who steadily rose through the ranks of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) officialdom, ultimately serving as CAW president for 16 years, died last month at the age of 81.

Hargrove succeeded Bob White as CAW president in 1992, some seven years after the union was formed through a nationalist split with the United Auto Workers (UAW), the union that had hitherto united Canadian and US autoworkers. He remained at the CAW’s helm until September 2008, stepping down just as the world financial system was imploding.

Upon his death, the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canadian big business, published an obituary notable only for highlighting the fawning and mendacious tributes from “past and present union associates, business leaders, politicians, community activists and,” or so the *Globe* claimed, “front-line workers.” Hargrove was, according to these eulogies, “a tireless champion for workers’ rights and human rights, a worthy adversary, a master negotiator and a strategic genius.”

Lana Payne, herself a consummate career union functionary and the current president of Unifor (which was formed through the CAW’s 2013 merger with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union), proudly proclaimed that the current union is following squarely in the tradition of “the legend” Hargrove.

Of course, the publishers of the *Globe*, while printing obsequious quotes from auto executives and Hargrove’s fellow union bureaucrats, were somehow unable to find anything worth printing from the “front-line workers” who supposedly also offered their “tributes.”

They would perhaps have done better had they emulated reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* in conducting plant gate interviews with rank-and-file autoworkers during the final years of Hargrove’s presidency. At GM in Oshawa, for example, shortly before Hargrove’s retirement, workers were not shy about sharing their opinions. “Hargrove better not set foot in this plant,” said one worker, “or he just might end up like Jimmy Hoffa.” “Get a broom and push them all out,” opined another. “Listen. Hargrove’s got to retire. He’s no good to anybody except maybe [Magna CEO] Stronach. Or the Liberals,” said a third.

Of the steady stream of miserable concessions contracts pushed through by the CAW, another worker said, “Hargrove says he doesn’t do concessions here in Canada. But that’s bullshit. They just don’t admit it, that’s all. But he’s not going to be able to hide it any more. Our next contract’s going to be loaded with concessions. I just don’t know what we’re going to do. We should never have split with the Americans. That opened the floodgates.”

Pillars of the Canadian business establishment, preparing for a black-tie retirement gala organized in Hargrove’s honour, saw things differently. Arturo Elias, then GM Canada’s president, told reporters, “Buzz has had a remarkable career leading the CAW, steering it through growth and maturity as Canada’s largest private sector union. Well done,

Buzz!”

Hargrove’s infamous statement in his 1999 autobiography, *Labour of Love: The Fight to Create a More Humane Canada*, promoting unions as good for big business and profits, goes far to spotlight the vast gulf that opened up between rank-and-file workers and the CAW officialdom, as well the union’s ever deepening partnership with the auto bosses.

Hargrove is most indignant when he rails against those “outdated” corporate and political opponents who arrogantly refuse to acknowledge the role that unions play in guaranteeing workers’ acquiescence on the shop floor and in society at large.

“Unions,” he writes, “probably prevent more strikes than they precipitate. Three out of every four workers say they don’t trust their employer. Good unions work to diffuse that anger. ... Unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of workers resistance (low productivity, absenteeism). If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that labour leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes.” Just look at the Big Three auto companies, asserts Hargrove, those huge profits show that unions provide a valuable service to the corporations.

If Hargrove’s eulogists highlight his “strategic genius,” it is precisely in his endeavours to diffuse worker militancy, scuttle strikes, ram through concessions contracts, and ensure a steady dividend return to the shareholders of the auto companies and the continued growth of the salaries and expense accounts of his fellow bureaucrats.

On a broader political scale, Hargrove’s services rendered to the ruling class as a key architect of a “ground-breaking” union alliance with the big business Liberals earned him particular esteem, especially in the wake of the leading role the CAW played alongside the Ontario Federation of Labour in scuttling the mass working class movement that erupted in the latter half of the 1990s against Mike Harris’ Thatcherite Tory provincial government. (See Part 2).

The 1985 UAW Split

Hargrove first came to the attention of the national press during and in the immediate aftermath of the 1985 split with the UAW, while he served as chief lieutenant to UAW Canadian Region head, then CAW President Bob White.

Like White, Hargrove argued for and justified the split in frankly Canadian nationalist terms, as an assertion of Canadian workers’ “independence” and right to determine “their own course.” At the same time, the CAW, aided and abetted by its research director, the pseudo-left Sam Gindin, tried to cast the split as a blow to contract concessions, in opposition to the pro-company orientation of the UAW Solidarity House leadership in Detroit.

This was entirely disingenuous.

As White later admitted in his autobiography *Hard Bargains*, he organized the secession of the union's Canadian division because he feared and opposed the prospect of a militant, united struggle by Canadian and US autoworkers against the concessions policy of the UAW leadership, and its subordination of workers' jobs and working conditions to the imperative of capitalist profit.

In the years immediately prior to the split, the Canadian UAW leaders were able to negotiate contracts that excluded some, but not all of the horrendous give-backs engineered by UAW President Owen Bieber. This was not because of any principled opposition or genuine resolve to mobilize workers' power against concessions and challenge the companies' "right" to shut "unprofitable" plants, but because the Big Three automakers enjoyed an \$8 labour-cost advantage at their Canadian operations. This was due to the lower value of the Canadian dollar, the existence of a publicly-funded national healthcare system and other factors.

Canadian workers, it need be added, were more adamant in their opposition to wage cuts than their brothers and sisters in the US, because their pay cheques were being eroded far more quickly by skyrocketing inflation and interest rates.

The UAW split was a divorce initiated by White and the union apparatus in Canada and ultimately supported by Solidarity House—including through the ceding of more than \$40 million in union assets—that served the interests of the bureaucracy on both sides of the border.

The decision to abandon any fight against concessions within the UAW and split the unity of North American autoworkers opened the way not just for a whole wave of further concessions in the US. It enabled the Big Three auto companies to increasingly pit Canadian and American workers against each other in a series of "whipsaw" threats to close plants and cut wages.

The UAW and CAW bureaucrats responded by ever more explicitly pursuing a bidding war at workers' expense, with each seeking to undercut the other by offering lower labor costs and higher profits to the auto companies.

White and Hargrove did everything in their power to break the international unity of autoworkers because they were bitterly hostile to waging a joint struggle against concessions by tapping into the immense oppositional sentiment amongst American autoworkers reeling from years of layoffs and concessions. Speaking as a faithful servant of big business and the Canadian ruling class, White said, "I didn't become the leader of the workers revolutionary league overnight just because we are taking an independent course."

White and Hargrove's breaking of the bonds of international solidarity that had united Canadian and US autoworkers since the 1930s was part of the drive of the union bureaucracy on both sides of the border to repudiate all the militant traditions with which the UAW had once been associated.

Recognizing they were fighting against the same bosses and inspired by the 1937 Flint, Michigan, sit-down strike and other militant struggles, workers in Canada invited the UAW to organize them. When Oshawa GM workers struck in 1937, and again in 1945, when Ford's operations in Windsor, Ontario, were blockaded by workers on both sides of the border, the Canadian business and political elite responded with vituperative Canadian nationalist and anti-communist tirades against the workers.

Similarly, in 1985, the Canadian ruling class made clear its support for the breaking-up of the UAW along nationalist lines, notwithstanding White and Hargrove's ostensible "no concessions" stand.

Hargrove later explained that the CAW leadership's view on the crisis in the North American auto industry in the 1980s was informed by the opinion that concessions only delayed the Big Three from taking the "tough decisions" on corporate restructuring that were necessary. For Hargrove, the CAW's position, unlike that of Bieber in the US, was

meant to encourage the Big Three to take the "tough decisions," i.e., to lobby for trade war against Japan, lay off workers and close plants. Of course, the Big Three, for their part, pushed whenever possible for both concessions and the restructuring of their operations.

The auto bosses took full advantage of the reactionary nationalist rivalry between the UAW and CAW to systematically whip-saw jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions back and forth across the border. In Canada, more than two-thirds of all unionized auto assembly jobs have been lost since the split. Two-tier wage systems operate in both countries, defined benefit pension schemes exist only for the rapidly retiring group of veteran workers, traditional cost-of-living allowances are eroded or abolished and speed-up on the line continues unabated. In both countries, the unions back big-business parties that are complicit in the relentless attacks on the living standards of working people.

An ever-expanding anti-worker corporatist partnership

Under Hargrove, the CAW worked ever more directly in overt collusion with the employers. In a particularly egregious scheme, Hargrove openly lobbied in support of billionaire CEO Gerald Schwartz of the private equity firm Onex in his failed 1999 bid to merge Air Canada and Canadian Airlines (CAI). Hargrove's support for the Onex bid was viewed by the press and investor analysts as a coup for Schwartz that could very well tip the balance in a pending Air Canada shareholder vote on the Onex offer.

The CAW president had repeatedly said the union recognized that there were too many workers in the Canadian air transport industry. The union's role, Hargrove insisted, was to assist in an "orderly" rationalization of the industry. Hargrove claimed that in return for the CAW's support, Onex had given a written guarantee that for two years there would be no layoffs of CAW members at Air Canada or CAI. For the first two years, all job cuts would be achieved through retirements, attrition and buyouts.

The 5,000 CAW members in the industry did not believe their president. Demonstrations were organized. Workers from other airline unions who had no such guarantees against layoffs also revolted. With opposition amongst airline workers and an unfavourable court ruling, the Onex bid was eventually withdrawn.

But perhaps the most outrageous corporatist deal engineered by Hargrove was his ill-fated "Framework of Fairness" agreement in 2007 with Frank Stronach, the notorious anti-union boss of auto parts giant Magna International. Under the deal, Stronach was to invite the CAW to organize his company's plants in return for the union giving an indefinite no-strike pledge and abandoning the grievance procedure and other fundamental union principles. The proposed agreement was greeted with unbridled enthusiasm from the investor community. Of the 21 investment analysts who covered Magna, as tracked by Bloomberg, eight posted "buy" or "outperform" stock ratings, 12 recommended a "hold," and only one posted a "sell" report.

But once again, workers had a different view. The deal would become effective only when ratified by workers at each plant in the Magna empire. Both Stronach and Hargrove actively promoted the new "non-adversarial" arrangement, in which the union would work as an adjunct of management in enhancing corporate competitiveness and profitability and suppressing worker dissent. But autoworkers in explosive mass meetings at GM plants in Oshawa, St. Catharines and CAMI Ingersoll angrily voted against the proposals.

Workers at the auto parts plants organized by the CAW were also seething. Autoworkers at Ford assembly operations in St. Thomas and

Oakville had already mobilized against another corporatist deal proposed by Hargrove and Stronach that would have introduced for the first time collective agreements featuring two tier-wages and benefits at St. Thomas Assembly in exchange for a parts supply arrangement with Magna.

Such was the outrage among the CAW membership that these schemes largely fell by the wayside. Not even the mobilization of the long-retired icon of the union bureaucracy, Bob White, to shill for the deals with Magna could turn the tide.

To be continued



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