

Buzz Hargrove and the rotten corporatist legacy of the Canadian Auto Workers—Part 2

1 August 2025

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

Shackling the working class to the union-NDP-Liberal alliance

During Hargrove's 16 years as CAW president and in tandem with its ever more naked role as an enforcer of concessions and job cuts, Canada's largest industrial union lurched politically sharply right.

Hargrove emerged as a keen advocate of closer ties with the big business Liberals in national politics and in Ontario, the country's most populous and industrialized province. From 1998 on, Unifor championed so-called "strategic voting"—that is, votes for Liberal candidates in preference to those of the social-democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP), if they were better placed to defeat the Conservatives. Inside the NDP, with which Unifor remained formally affiliated until 2008, Hargrove and the CAW bureaucrats pressed for governmental alliances with the Liberals when parliamentary arithmetic allowed.

Hargrove was thus among the principal architects of the union-NDP-Liberal alliance, which has been used to politically suppress the working class for the past quarter-century. Just three months after Hargrove stepped down as CAW president, the NDP agreed to serve as the junior partner in an abortive Liberal-led national coalition government pledged to implementing more than \$50 billion in corporate tax cuts, ensuring "fiscal responsibility," and waging neo-colonial war in Afghanistan through 2011.

In pursuing closer ties with the Liberals, long the ruling class's preferred party of national government, and developing an ever-expanding network of corporatist ties, Hargrove was true to his mentor Bob White. White and the CAW had championed the 1985 Liberal-NDP accord, which had brought the Liberals to power in Ontario, and aligned the CAW closely with John Turner and his Liberals in the 1987 "free trade" federal election.

That said, in response to the intensification of the class struggle, the CAW bureaucracy under Hargrove abandoned ever more brazenly even the pretense of independent working class politics; and in the name of opposing the Tories propped up "progressive" governments committed to austerity and advancing the interests of Canadian imperialism through aggression and war.

This was part of a much larger, worldwide process. The development of globally integrated production and a global labour market, beginning in the 1970s, had pulled the rug out from under the pro-capitalist trade unions and social-democratic parties, whose reformist programs were based on the possibility of pressuring capital within the nation-state.

The universal response of the union bureaucracies was to defend their privileges by wooing investment and enforcing concessions on the workers they claimed to represent. The social-democratic parties,

meanwhile, jettisoned their pursuit of social reform and, when in office, dismantled the very public services and social provisions they had previously held up as proof capitalism could be "humanized." Tony Blair's Labour government and Gerhard Schröder's Social Democrats in Germany, to mention only two of the most prominent, emerged as unalloyed proponents of right-wing capitalist policies.

The same was true of the NDP, most notoriously in Ontario, where, to the surprise of both the social democratic politicians and the CAW bureaucrats, the social democrats were elected to office for the first time ever in October 1990. Workers had turned to the union-sponsored NDP in the hopes that it would protect them from the ravages of a rapidly developing economic slump. Instead, the Rae NDP governments imposed massive public spending cuts and wage austerity and parroted the rhetoric of the right on everything from welfare "reform" to law and order. Returning from a session of the Davos Economic Forum, Rae bluntly declared there was "no alternative" to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

The United Steelworkers (USW), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and most industrial unions staunchly supported the Rae government throughout, including the wage and job cutting "social contract" it imposed on the province's more than one million public sector workers. Hargrove and the CAW top brass, by contrast, struck a pose of opposition, assisting the leaders of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), and the other major public sector unions in containing mass anger among their membership by organizing a few token protests.

Hargrove could on occasion make a demagogic speech, thundering against the bosses and the politicians, and throwing in a few expletives for extra spice. He even blustered a handful of times in his decades-long career about a "general strike." All of this was aimed at suppressing worker opposition, straitjacketing it within the pro-employer, state-regulated collective bargaining system and channeling it into capitalist parliamentary politics.

The CAW and the mass working class challenge to the Harris Tory government

The Rae NDP government's assault on the working class, and the unions' suppression of workers' opposition to it, opened the door to the election of a rabidly right-wing Tory government headed by Mike Harris.

When a mass movement of workers against Harris' Thatcherite "Common Sense Revolution" developed, raising the issue of a general strike to bring down the government, unions in the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) worked systematically to block the struggle by preventing it from developing into a direct political confrontation with the Tory Premier's class war agenda. Union bureaucrats refused to set a date for a

general strike demanded by their members, staging various “days of action” organized regionally to diffuse popular anger. Hargrove and the CAW negotiated with the auto bosses for workers to have the day off, so production was not disrupted. Summing up the bureaucracy’s politics, OFL President Gord Wilson infamously declared that the unions were not challenging the “legitimacy” of the Tory government or Harris’ “right to govern.”

Hargrove and the CAW were intimately involved in the sabotage of this movement. As a CAW insider present at the November 1995 convention reported in David Rapaport’s book *No Justice, No Peace*, “The labour movement was dragged into [the anti-Harris protests] kicking and screaming. The vast majority wanted to do nothing except just educate our members to just vote NDP in the next election.”

Hargrove shutdown a militant three-week contract strike by thousands of General Motors workers only two days before a Toronto “day of action” shut down the largest city in the province and Canada’s financial capital. And when teachers mounted an overtly political strike in 1997 challenging legislation that dramatically increased class sizes and otherwise attacked their rights and public education, the CAW and other OFL unions ensured the mass popular support for the teachers was not translated into industrial action and a fight to bring down the hated Harris regime.

Plumping for votes for Paul Martin and Dalton McGuinty

With the mass movement of workers finally isolated and then stifled, Hargrove summed up his own perspective. “Our message here ... has to be that, in spite of some differences in the labour movement ... we are of one mind—one thing we are determined and united on—that’s to defeat Mike Harris’ government in the next election.”

But how to do that?

In the wake of the tumultuous events between 1995 and 1997—which saw workers nearly break free of the death grip of the union bureaucracies—Hargrove and many others in the array of unions that formed the OFL, clearly saw that the danger of renewed working class struggle could no longer be politically managed by an NDP that had been overwhelmingly rejected by its electoral base after the abject betrayals of the previous Rae government. New political alliances would have to be built.

In the 1999 provincial election the CAW called for a “strategic vote” for the Ontario Liberals in select ridings, a position effectively endorsed by Howard Hampton, the new leader of Ontario’s NDP. The Harris Conservatives were, nevertheless, returned to government with another majority.

Hargrove was undeterred. In the next election in 2003 he bluntly declared, “People know how to bring about a change in government and you don’t do that by voting for someone who doesn’t have a prayer of winning. We are looking at information riding by riding, to see where there are opportunities to knock off a Tory.”

The Liberals, led by Dalton McGuinty, won the election, on a program that was widely described, even in the capitalist media, as “Tory-lite.” With the CAW/Unifor’s support the Liberals would impose austerity policies for the next 15 years before handing the baton back to the Conservatives. But unlike Harris and his brief Conservative successor as premier, Ernie Eves, McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne did not bait the “union bosses.” Rather through a network of institutionalized and informal corporatist ties, they used them to provide a phony “progressive” cover for a continued assault on the working class.

In 2007, Hargrove enthusiastically ushered McGuinty onto the podium

of a CAW National Council meeting at the union bureaucracy’s Lake Huron retreat. “I believe this government has done an incredible job for people,” he gushed. McGuinty’s appearance marked the first time in the CAW’s history that an Ontario premier had been invited to address the CAW leadership. Hargrove went on to tell the assembled officials that he was “absolutely thrilled” to introduce McGuinty, whom he characterized as a “champion” of the automobile industry. The big business Liberal premier returned the compliment. “The CAW,” he affirmed, “has always been a force for good across Canada and we are rolling in the same direction.”

Hargrove’s unabashed embrace of McGuinty on the shores of Lake Huron was the CAW bureaucracy’s response to a looming and unprecedented crisis in the auto industry that threatened the jobs, wages and pensions of tens of thousands of auto workers. Its embrace of the Liberals was the political corollary to the union’s imposition of a new round of concessions at various Detroit Three auto plants and its agitation for protectionist measures to defend “Canadian jobs” at the expense of workers in other countries.

During this time, Hargrove did not rule out supporting select Conservatives. After McGuinty’s unprecedented appearance before the CAW leadership, Hargrove told the press that he fully expects to have union members working for all three national parties, including the Conservatives.

Hargrove also extended his strategic voting orientation to the federal Liberals and strongly supported the moves of the NDP to prop up the minority Liberal government of Prime Minister Paul Martin. Cementing this new relationship during the 2006 federal election, and to much fanfare, he presented the multi-millionaire Martin with a CAW union jacket—the same man who, previously as Jean Chretien’s finance minister, had orchestrated the greatest social spending and big business tax cuts in Canadian history. Hargrove would go on to publicly stump for Martin and Liberal MP Belinda Stronach, daughter of the boss and principal owner of auto parts giant Magna International.

Hargrove responded to a subsequent NDP decision to expel him for having endorsed a rival political party by successfully pressing for the CAW and its locals to disaffiliate from the NDP. This ruptured a decades-long relationship between the CAW and Canada’s social democrats. The latter, it should be added, were not too upset to see the severing of the NDP-CAW tie, since they, in response to pressure from big business and the corporate media, were anxious to refute allegations that they were organizationally and financially dependent on the unions. It would only be a few years later that an NDP convention would go further and vote to expunge from their constitution the word “socialism.”

In his final years as CAW president, Hargrove acquiesced to a steady stream of auto plant closures and pushed through ever more draconian concessions contracts. In 2008, just prior to his retirement, and with Oshawa autoworkers seething from GM’s renegeing of previous promises to keep open the local truck plant, Hargrove sought to diffuse calls for wildcat strike action and instead organized a phony “blockade” of GM’s white-collar headquarters building in Oshawa. The so-called blockade allowed any staff that GM deemed critical to operations to proceed through the picket line. Less critical staff, meanwhile, continued to work from home or from a pre-arranged backup site.

The publicity stunt at the headquarters was a grandstand play—a transparent attempt to convince the membership that the union leadership was not simply a patsy to the company. The captains of industry, however, had long ago taken the measure of Hargrove as little more than a junior partner of their corporations. Even as the blockade was limping towards its final days before the union began negotiations for the “orderly” closure of the truck plant, Mr. Buzz Hargrove was the guest of honour at perhaps the largest ever gathering of millionaires, big business politicians, and well-heeled labour bureaucrats in Toronto’s history.

The tuxedo-only event was ostensibly meant to honour Hargrove for his contributions to a Toronto charity. Over fine wines and gourmet delicacies, Hargrove, whom the media was touting as the scourge of the auto companies, was feted by the likes of Magna International boss Frank Stronach, anti-union book retailer Heather Reisman and her husband Gerry Schwartz, CEO of Onex Corporation. Amongst the political glitterati on the guest list were arch neo-conservatives Brian Mulroney, Ernie Eves, and Mike Harris. Workfare pioneer and former New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna acted as co-chair at the festivities. Perhaps most telling of all was the presence—at the head-table no less—of Troy Clarke, vice-president of GM North America and Arturo Elias, president of GM Canada.

Hargrove's ruinous, anti-worker legacy

Hargrove's lengthy tenure at the head of the CAW set the stage for the union to move sharply further to the right and deepen its anti-worker corporatist ties with big business and the state following his retirement.

Together with the UAW in the US, the CAW worked closely in 2009 with the Big Three auto bosses, the Obama administration in Washington, and the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments to impose massive wage and benefit cuts and multi-tier wage structures to restore the profitability of the North American auto industry. Although Ford Canada eschewed a government "bailout," which was conditional on the unions' reopening of workers' contracts, the CAW "in fairness" imposed the same concessions on Ford workers.

Politically, the CAW's transformation into Unifor in 2013 was accompanied by the development of still more intimate working relations with the Liberals. Unifor joined with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and other unions in corraling the mass working class opposition to the hard-right Harper government behind an "Anybody but Conservative" campaign that delivered the 2015 election to Justin Trudeau's big business Liberals.

Unifor President Jerry Dias emerged as a key booster and advisor of both Trudeau and Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne, whom he hailed as "progressives" and "workers' allies."

Unifor supported the Liberals' massive military spending increase and renegotiation of NAFTA to consolidate a US-dominated trade bloc for the waging of war around the world. After Trudeau's Liberals were reduced to a minority government in the October 2019 election, Unifor pressed for the NDP to strengthen its support for the government, including through a formal coalition.

During the pandemic, Unifor and the CLC were instrumental in helping the Trudeau government orchestrate a multi-billion-dollar bailout of corporate Canada and implementing the murderous profits-before-lives back-to-work policy that claimed thousands of lives.

From its beginnings in 1985 to today, the CAW/Unifor apparatus has incessantly promoted reactionary Canadian nationalism. In 2023, when contracts expired for autoworkers at GM, Ford and Stellantis on both sides of the Canada-US border simultaneously for the first time in over two decades opening the door wide to a joint struggle, Unifor President Payne rushed to proclaim Unifor's commitment to charting "our own Canadian course"; then helped sabotage a growing strike movement in the US by signing concessionary contracts.

Today Payne sits on Prime Minister Mark Carney's Council on Canada-US Relations, where she helps the Canadian ruling class elaborate its strategy in the reactionary trade war between North America's imperialist powers. Like the CLC, Unifor has been in the frontlines of agitating for aggressive trade war measures whose principal victims will be workers in

the US, China and Canada.

Hargrove's career exemplified the evolution of the trade union bureaucracy in Canada and internationally. In response to the globalization of production and capital's drive to intensify worker exploitation, the caste of well-heeled union officials integrated themselves ever more fully into corporate management and the state, imposing concessions and suppressing working class resistance to the dismantling of public services and the evisceration of workers' rights.

Workers seeking to fight today against capitalist austerity and war must not simply repudiate Hargrove, but the entire nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective of trade unionism that he so avidly promoted.

To assert their class interests and defend their livelihoods and lives, workers must reject the subordination of their jobs, working conditions, and public services to the accumulation of private profit by a tiny wealthy oligarchy. Against the transnational companies and capitalist governments that seek to pit them against each other in the drive for profit and commercial and geopolitical advantage, workers in Canada must forge the closest fighting unity with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world. To mobilize their industrial and independent class political power, workers in Canada must break out of the corporatist union/NDP/Liberal alliance that Hargrove did so much to straitjacket them within.

To restore power to the rank and file, abolish the union bureaucracy, and intensify the class struggle, workers should build new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees under the leadership of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees—and take up the fight for workers' power and socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact