

# Top Ontario union official defends Tory government's multi-billion-dollar training program amid fraud scandal

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Ontario's Progressive Conservative government is mired in another corruption scandal. This one concerns its now well-documented use of a \$2.5 billion Skills Development Fund to steer government largesse to trade union and business supporters.

The Skills Fund is ostensibly meant to enable organizations to train, re-train and hire workers to ensure there is a resilient and skilled workforce to fill "in-demand" jobs in a "challenged" economic environment.

However, evidence continues to emerge demonstrating that the initiative has largely served as a political slush fund.

The scandal has led to calls from all the opposition parties in the provincial legislature for the resignation of Premier Doug Ford's Labour Minister, David Piccini. Last week New Democratic Party leader Marit Stiles filed an official complaint with the province's integrity commissioner requesting a corruption investigation into Piccini's management of the Skills Development Fund (SDF). "We believe," wrote Stiles in an accompanying letter, "there are credible allegations of preferential treatment regarding the approval, oversight, and distribution of SDF grants."

Such is the depth and breadth of the affair that Toronto business and union elites found it necessary to come to the defence of the embattled labour minister last week at a \$129-per-plate ballroom luncheon held by the blue-chip Empire Club.

Most notable was the speech given by Joseph Mancinelli, the Canadian director of the Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), which co-sponsored the event. Attempting to deflect the burgeoning suspicions surrounding Labour Minister Piccini and the Conservative government, Mancinelli—whose union has taken millions from the fund—bellowed, "Some of the things that I've heard, and the attacks, the unfounded attacks that have been focused and thrown at Minister Piccini and the premier, and words like corruption, are words that should never be spoken in the legislature." Then, turning the whole affair on its head, Mancinelli accused those exposing the scandal as the real "corrupt people that are ruining this province."

The scandal blew up after Auditor-General Shelley Spence released a report that cited "troubling" findings about the way funds have been disbursed, terming the process neither transparent nor fair, or accountable.

Among Spence's findings were that Piccini's office has systematically awarded funds to both businesses and trade unions whose SDF applications civil servants had ranked as poor, low or medium in meeting the program's goals and criteria, and did so in preference to applications given better ranking.

Moreover, the successful poorly-ranked applicants were often notable donors to the Progressive Conservative Party and/or supporters who had energetically endorsed the party in previous election campaigns. Of the \$1.3 billion awarded to date by Piccini's office, \$742 million has been

allotted to projects that civil servants attached to the Labour Ministry deemed sub-standard. According to the auditor-general, Piccini's office "consistently" overrode the concerns of the civil servants tasked with evaluating and ranking the SDF applications.

Piccini's office has refused to release the specific rankings of any particular recipient—including the low-rated requests he approved.

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* will not be surprised at an additional finding regarding the use of monies granted through the Skills Development Fund. The executive pay at organizations whose applications were approved jumped significantly. CTV journalists, who could only examine records for public and non-profit businesses, found in a quick survey that executive pay jumped significantly at more than a dozen entities receiving Skills Development Funding.

The news outlet cited numbered company 12490625 Canada Institute, which received \$9.8 million since the inception of the government program. In the 2024 grant round, the company received \$3.25 million. Over a two-year period, the salary of Executive Director Eugenia Andonov spiked by 24 percent to \$125,000. Andonov lists the address of her company as a semi-detached home in a Toronto suburb, the same address as another company, the Social Equality and Inclusion Centre (SEI) which also lists Andonov as a director. The SEI is listed as a center for retraining women for other jobs. City records show SEI connections with Zlatko Starkovski, who is a top booster in the Premier's "Ford Nation" political movement and who operates an adult entertainment business.

In another example from its survey, CTV reports that the Ontario Good Roads Association received a \$1.1 million grant in 2022-2023, when its Executive Director Scott Butler was paid \$254,000. The following year, when the grant rose to \$1.7 million, Butler's pay rose to \$287,000.

The government's largesse with its funding program is not limited to business interests. Despite low-ranked applications, almost \$40 million from the Skills Development Fund was allotted to unions that endorsed Ford—a notorious right-winger and one-time Trump enthusiast—for re-election last February. According to secret data obtained by the *Toronto Star*, eight of the 17 union organizations whose leaders supported Ford have received at least 14 payments from the fund.

The largest recipient among the unions that have cozied up to the Ford government and supported its re-election earlier this year was the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario. In two funding periods, it was awarded \$19.5 million even after receiving application evaluations marked "low" by the Labour ministry civil service. In 2024, civil servants graded the union's application at only 57 per cent. Nevertheless the Skills Fund on Piccini's orders forked over \$5.5-million. For this year's grant, the Ministry score was even lower, just 52 percent, yet Piccini signed off on a \$14 million SDF grant, almost three times larger.

In May 2024, the Carpenter's Council hosted a fundraiser for Piccini's Conservative election-district (riding) association. It netted \$120,000, with union officials reportedly buying up the majority of the \$1,000 per head tickets for the event. The union subsequently endorsed the Ford government's re-election.

In other fund transfers, three locals of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers received \$3.63 million despite their applications receiving low scores—62, 56 and a manifestly abysmal 36. The Toronto-based local with the 36 score said it would use 80 percent of the monies received to meet the “administrative costs” the union bureaucrats would incur in running the program. For application ranking purposes, the maximum allowed for “administration” was only 15 percent. Yet the local was provided over \$1 million.

Other notable unions that supported the re-election of the Ford government and received grants from the fund with a mixture of higher and lower scores for various applications were the hotel workers union UNITE HERE, with about 10,000 members in the province, and the building labourers' union LiUNA, with 130,000 Ontario members.

The Piccini-led Labour Ministry's use of the Skills Development Fund to reward the Tories' business and union bureaucrat political allies sheds further light on the motivations behind Ontario government's drive to privatize job-training. The government's promotion of business and union-led “training programs” has gone hand in hand with its diversion of resources from the province's community college system, which for decades has played a central role in skills training. The Ford government's is currently presiding over massive cuts to the community college system, with hundreds of curriculum programs cancelled and the jobs of some 10,000 of the 50,000 college faculty, support and administrator jobs at risk.

Last summer LiUNA quit the Ontario Federation of Labour when the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), apparently with the OFL's support, complained that the Ford government's training schemes are a key element of the government's attacks on public education. The 180,000-member OPSEU, it should be added, has been shaken in recent years by a corruption scandal of its own, involving its former president, Smokey Thomas, who also developed close ties with the Ford government.

The unions' deepening corporatist integration with governmental and business elites was also reflected in Piccini's appointment of Dave Cassidy, the former President of Unifor Local 444 at the Windsor Stellantis operations, to a Labour Ministry job. In 2022 Cassidy unsuccessfully contested for the post of Unifor national president after its long-time leader, Jerry Dias, was forced to resign after being implicated in a COVID-19 safety-kit kickback scandal. Two years later Cassidy was hired on as a Labour Ministry Skilled Trades Special Advisor (STSA).

According to a release from the province, “The new advisor will assess the workforce needs in Ontario's skilled trades, focusing on the manufacturing and automotive industries, including electric vehicles (EV).” At the time, both the federal Liberal and Ontario Tory governments were pouring money in the form of grants, loans and tax concessions to the Detroit Three, with Unifor's full-throated support, to entice them to place EV investments in Ontario. However, this attempt to make Canadian capitalism a player in the global auto industry has been dealt a body blow by Trump's tariffs and scrapping of Biden's EV industry incentives.

In what is a first in Canadian autoworker history, the leadership of the 3,000-strong Unifor local at the closure-threatened Brampton Stellantis auto plant also endorsed Ford and his openly right-wing, pro-big business Tories in the 2025 election campaign.

The corruption evident in the government's skills development program is of a piece with the charges of corruption surrounding the Ford regime's dealings with big land developers in the Green Belt sell-off and in the

recent Ontario Place development boondoggle. But scandal in bourgeois politics is not simply an accidental by-product of a few bad actors or even an unmoored political party. It is an expression of deeper social and economic processes rooted in the capitalist system.

At the most immediate level, corruption—bribery, patronage, crony contracts, revolving doors between state, corporations and union bureaucracies—represents the means by which the capitalist elites secure access to state funds and shape government policy to boost their profits. These practices are not extraneous to the functioning of the state; they are built into it. The capitalist state is a political instrument that organizes and enforces class rule. Corruption is the crude, visible face of that instrument when private interests circumvent norms and institutions to extract contracts and favours or privatize public wealth.

The fact that the union bureaucracies are so fully integrated in this process underscores their transformation over the past four decades into corporatist appendages of the state and big business. These organizations no longer even represent workers' interests in a limited sense, but rather defend the privileges and perks of a privileged middle-class layer that functions as an arm of management and the state in policing the working class.

This corporatist partnership is expressed in the unions' systematic suppression of the class struggle. They impose concessions and job cuts in the name of ensuring corporate “competitiveness,” and sabotage worker resistance by isolating strikes and enforcing anti-strike laws.

Politically, the unions subordinate workers to right-wing capitalist parties. For six years, the union bureaucracy—through its political mouthpiece, the NDP—has propped up successive minority Liberal governments, as they have broken strikes, massively increased military spending, and presided over a massive intensification of economic distress. Now, the union bureaucrats are serving as pliant junior partners in “Team Canada.” That is in the ruling class' alliance to defend its profits and strategic interests in the name of opposing Trump's trade war and annexation threats through a massive shift further right. This includes adopting large swathes of Trump's oligarchic social policy.

The working class needs independent organs of struggle—rank-and-file committees—independent political organization, and a program to break the grip of the corporatist union bureaucracies over their struggles. This program must be based on the fight for the political independence of the working class from all bourgeois parties and their supporters, i.e., a socialist and internationalist perspective aimed at securing workers' power to put an end to corrupt dealings and privileges for the few, and meet the social needs of the vast majority.



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