

Canada's union top brass fetes Prime Minister Trudeau

By Roger Jordan
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The top brass of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the country's principal union federation, held a closed-door meeting Tuesday with newly installed Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The 45-minute gathering was the first time in 57 years that a sitting Prime Minister had met with the Canadian Council, the body that governs the CLC between conventions. Over a hundred leading union bureaucrats were addressed by Trudeau, then invited to ask him questions.

Tellingly, Trudeau's spokeswoman, Kate Purchase, explained that the event had been closed to the media so that a "full and frank discussion" could take place. In other words, plans are already well underway for the unions to closely collaborate with the Liberals in implementing their big-business agenda and suppressing working-class opposition to it.

In his remarks, Trudeau made clear that his government intends to have a different relationship with the trade union bureaucracy than did Stephen Harper and his Conservatives.

Rather than deliberately marginalizing the union officialdom and using rightwing legislation to hobble their activities, the Liberals intend to give them "a seat at the table," enlisting them as junior partners in the drive to bolster the profitability and global position of Canadian capitalism.

Repeating a phrase he employed during the election campaign, Trudeau said that "labour is not a problem, but a solution."

To underscore the shift in the government's attitude to the unions, Trudeau repeated the Liberals' election pledge to repeal two Conservative antiunion laws, Bill C-377 and Bill C-525. The first imposes onerous obligations on the unions to provide extensive reports on their spending and activities, while the second makes it more difficult to win union recognition.

Trudeau has also promised to reestablish the special tax concessions for trade union-controlled investment funds that Harper abolished in the Conservatives' 2014 budget. These funds provide the union officialdom with lucrative directorships and connections. With \$10 billion in assets, the Quebec Federation of Labour's Solidarity Fund is far and away Quebec's largest venture capital fund.

During his question-and-answer session with the CLC leaders, Trudeau ducked a question as to whether his government will provide financial support to the struggling aircraft manufacturer Bombardier. He would only say that a "strong business case" would have to be made before his government follows the

example of the Quebec Liberal government, which in late October made an emergency injection of US \$1 billion into Bombardier.

Trudeau was also asked about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), with concerns raised about its impact on the auto industry. Although he promised a comprehensive parliamentary debate on Canada's entry into the US-led trade bloc, the Liberals have already strongly indicated their support for it. The Canadian bourgeoisie views the Pacific Rim trade and investment deal as essential to maintaining its close relations with the United States and expanding its exports into Asian markets.

Trudeau's meeting with the unions was an indication of the debt of gratitude he owes to the union bureaucracy for the Liberals' victory in last month's federal election. The CLC and its affiliates poured millions into "Anybody but Harper" advertising and on-the-ground initiatives that advocated voting for the candidate best placed to defeat Conservative incumbents. This translated into support for a Liberal government and played an indispensable role in encouraging "strategic voting."

The Canadian ruling class's preferred party of government for most of the last century, the Liberals when last in power implemented the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history and revived Canadian militarism by sending Canadian forces to battle in US-led wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. Yet the unions' shamelessly promoted them as a "progressive" alternative to Harper.

In truth, Trudeau's "real change" is nothing but a repackaging of the agenda of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and imperialist war pursued by the Conservatives during their decade in office.

The Liberals uphold the reactionary fiscal framework imposed over the past quarter-century by successive Liberal and Conservative governments via the dismantling of public and social services and massive tax handouts to big business and the rich. Trudeau is proposing merely to run small deficits for three years to fund infrastructure investment, which will be clawed back from the working class through as yet unspecified savings. The Liberals are also pledged to deepening Canada's strategic partnership with US imperialism and to making minor changes to the draconian Bill C-51 to mollify popular opposition to its antidemocratic contents.

None of this proved problematic for CLC President Hassan Yussuff. Following the meeting with Trudeau, he crowed, "Everybody who left the room was delighted that he came, and there was a strong sense that he was sincere in the things that he

was talking about.”

While sections of the union bureaucracy would have preferred the new government to be formed by their long-times allies in the New Democratic Party, the unions were quick to hail the election of a Liberal majority. In the words of a CLC statement issued to coincide with the swearing-in of the Liberal cabinet, the unions are offering “constructive collaboration” to “implement the progressive change promised during the election campaign.”

In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, Yussuff continued to pay lip service to the CLC’s support for the social-democratic NDP, which with the unions’ support mounted a “Harper lite” election campaign aimed at convincing big business that an NDP government would enforce its interests as faithfully as any formed by its traditional parties of government.

But the CLC president stressed that such ties should be no obstacle to working closely with the Trudeau government. “Elections,” said Yussuff, “come and go. The broader question is, now that the election is over, how do we work with this government and have a respectful relationship?”

The eagerness of the CLC to do business with the new Liberal government and promote its rightwing agenda as “progressive change” provides further illustration of the transformation of the unions into organizations irreconcilably hostile to the working class.

Rather than organizing worker resistance to the employers, the pro-capitalist unions have been transformed over the past three decades into an arm of corporate management that in the name of boosting corporate “competiveness,” i.e. profitability, imposes jobs and wage cuts and suppresses strikes.

Workers in Ontario have considerable experience with the reactionary consequences of an alliance between the unions and Liberals.

Since 2003, the unions have been propping up a rightwing Ontario Liberal government, with the unions’ Working Families’ Coalition promoting the Liberals as a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives at election times.

The union-backed Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty left in place the key policy changes of Mike Harris’s Common Sense Revolution, including brutal cuts to welfare and other social services and massive tax cuts for the well to do. The union bureaucracy, which had been rudely shunted aside by Harris, meanwhile, was welcomed onto various corporatist committees.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Ontario Liberals joined with the Harper government to impose \$20-per-hour wage and benefit cuts on GM and Chrysler workers and, like Harper, brought forward a new series of corporate tax cuts.

When the Ontario Liberals subsequently instituted massive social spending cuts and used Bill 115 to criminalize teacher job action and impose concessionary contracts, the unions intensified their campaign to “stop” Tim Hudak and his Conservatives.

With the unions’ support, the Liberals, now led by Kathleen Wynne, regained the parliamentary majority that they had lost in October 2012 in the June 2014 Ontario election. Since then and with only token dissent from the unions, the Wynne government has intensified its austerity drive, including through the imposition of net zero pay deals on teachers and other public sector workers,

and the privatization of the giant electricity utility Hydro One.

Significantly, key figures in Trudeau’s inner circle, such as his chief adviser Gerald Butts, cut their political teeth in the Ontario Liberal government under McGuinty and are well aware of the crucial role the union bureaucracy can play in forcing through an unpopular, rightwing agenda.

The CLC’s meeting with Trudeau serves as a devastating indictment of the role played by the pseudo-left groups Socialist Action, Fightback and the International Socialists. While nominally opposing the unions’ “Anybody but Harper” campaign, they supported all of the key initiatives that prepared the way for this reactionary initiative, including the “Stop Hudak” campaign. In the aftermath of Trudeau’s election, all three groups have maintained a stony silence on the role the trade unions played in the Liberals’ political rehabilitation.

Their refusal to criticize the unions is bound up with their own close ties to the union bureaucracy. Mike Palecek, who now serves as president of the 50,000-strong Canadian Union of Postal Workers, was until very recently a leading member of Fightback. He was present for Trudeau’s appearance Tuesday, and his praise for the new Liberal government is no less fulsome than that of his union colleagues.

Following Canada Post’s announcement that it will temporarily halt the establishment of community mailboxes in place of door-to-door mail delivery, Palecek declared, “We succeeded in making this a major election issue and making sure people understood exactly who it was and is to blame, and that’s Stephen Harper and the Conservative government. I think the Canadian public spoke loudly and clearly last week by changing the government.” He added that the union will now work to “demonstrate that Canada Post can generate new revenue streams” in the hopes of convincing the Liberals not to proceed with further service cuts.

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