

Canada: Ontario Liberals impose two-tier employment on autoworkers

By Carl Bronski
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Autoworkers in the Canadian province of Ontario have reacted angrily to new employment standards introduced by the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne, which exclude them from minimum provisions on sick, bereavement and emergency leave.

On January 1, the Fair Workplaces Better Jobs Act came into force, which gives workers in Ontario 10 days of personal emergency leave, two of which are paid. In a provision kept secret by the government in the run-up to enactment of the legislation, the act denies all workers in the auto sector those same minimal protections. Instead, autoworkers will be entitled to seven days of sick or emergency leave and three days of bereavement leave, all unpaid. There are about 150,000 union and non-union workers in the auto sector.

Auto industry executives lobbied heavily for the exemption. Shortly after Ray Tanguay, a former Toyota Canada chairman, was appointed as the federal and provincial government auto advisor, provisions were developed to exclude autoworkers from the general standard in the new law.

In defending the two-tier standard, Daniel Bitonti, a spokesperson from the provincial Ministry of Economic Development and Trade admitted that the exemption provision was driven by a desire to further hike the already fat profits of the auto companies. “In terms of the auto sector,” he said, “our approach is to balance the rights and needs of workers with ensuring the auto sector in Ontario remains competitive in what’s becoming a fast-changing global economy.”

The new legislation is a central element in the big business Liberals’ efforts to secure reelection in June’s provincial election. Since coming to power in Canada’s most populous province in 2003, the Liberals have collaborated closely with the trade union bureaucracy to dress up their right-wing, anti-worker policies in “progressive” garb. Governments led by Dalton McGuinty and Wynne have taken the axe to public spending, outlawed strikes and other workers job actions, privatized public utilities, and ensured

low tax rates for the super-rich.

The unions have poured millions of dollars into Liberal reelection campaigns on the basis of the spurious argument that it is the only way to stop the Tories. They have eagerly applauded their integration into numerous committees and consultative bodies set up by the government, including their own intimate involvement in the consultation process on the misnamed Safer Workplaces Better Jobs Act.

The Liberals, ably assisted by the trade union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left cheerleaders, have singled out a much more heavily publicized element in the Fair Workplaces Better Jobs Act in an effort to buttress Premier Wynne’s uphill battle for reelection. The minimum wage—previously set at \$11.60 (US\$9.33) per hour—was boosted to \$14 (US\$11.26) on January 1, and is scheduled to rise to \$15 (US\$12.06) next year.

Other provisions in the new employment standards are so weak that small businesses are already moving to counter the wage rise. Hours for minimum wage workers are being cut or jobs shed outright.

In a particularly scandalous move, Ron Joyce Jr. and Jeri-Lynn Horton-Joyce, the owners of two Tim Horton’s franchises and heirs to billionaire Ron Joyce Sr., the co-founder of the Tim Horton’s coffee shop empire, ordered their workers to sign a document acknowledging their loss of paid breaks, paid benefits and other monetary incentives. Workers at their franchises have calculated that the cutbacks—entirely legal under Wynne’s new standards—will cost a veteran full-time worker \$51 per paycheque which, despite the hike in the minimum wage, means an actual wage cut.

In a shameless display of hypocrisy, executives of Unifor, the union that organizes a portion of auto assembly and auto parts production in the province, denounced the Liberal government for the double standard in the new legislation that impacts not only unionized workers but tens of thousands of non-union employees in the auto sector. Yet Unifor has not only helped prop up the Liberal government for 15 years, but also worked hand-in-glove with auto

management for a decade in negotiating and enforcing two- and three-tier contracts for autoworkers.

Despite intense resistance to the institutionalization of multi-tiered pay and benefit schemes by unionized autoworkers, Unifor (and its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers) has rammed through contracts that provide newly hired workers with a fraction of the wages earned by veteran workers, end defined benefit pensions for these same new hires, reduce other basic benefits and acquiesce to the growth of a third-tier of Temporary Part-Time (TPT) employees who are forced to pay union dues but reap little or no contract protection. Such has been the naked collaboration between Unifor and the auto executives that attempts to unionize large assembly plants at Honda and Toyota have consistently failed as non-union assembly workers see no benefit in paying union dues in exchange for a never-ending stream of concession contracts.

So miserable are the terms of contracts at the Detroit Three assembly plants in Canada that even veteran workers receive no paid sick days.

Unifor, despite its current protestations, has led the way among Canada's trade unions in calling on its members to support Liberal candidates in most federal and provincial constituencies during election cycles. Unifor's current president, Jerry Dias, boasts of his access to the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau and is leading the way in whipping up Canadian nationalism to divide Canadian workers from workers in the US and Mexico during the ongoing North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) talks.

The Chretien-Martin Liberal government implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history between 1995 and 1997, then in 2000 gifted big business and the rich the largest ever tax cuts. In 2008-09 the Ontario Liberals worked hand-in-glove with the federal Conservative government to extort unprecedented wage and benefit cuts from Detroit Three autoworkers, declaring that any bailout of the industry was conditional on concessions, totaling \$19 per worker per hour and a "restructuring" program that eliminated thousands of jobs.

The support extended to this right-wing bourgeois party by Unifor and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole demonstrates the organic hostility of these organizations to any mobilization by the working class to boost wages and secure better working conditions.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its recent statement on the fight against Trudeau and Trump and the Canada-US alliance, "The unions' partnership with what has traditionally been the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government is the outcome of a decades-long march to the right on the part of the unions and their allies in the

social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). The unions have repudiated all traditions of independent working-class struggle, integrated themselves into management and tripartite union-government-company structures, and developed new sources of revenue giving them a direct stake in the exploitation of the working class."

Whenever autoworkers have sought to resist this gang-up of the corporations, big-business parties and union bureaucracy against them, Unifor has worked tirelessly to betray their struggles. Last fall, when CAMI autoworkers in Ingersoll, Ontario waged a determined month-long strike to secure wage increases, expressing their deep hostility to multi-tier contracts, Unifor sabotaged the strike and subordinated to its campaign over the renegotiation of NAFTA to supposedly secure "Canadian jobs."

This reactionary nationalist line isolated CAMI workers from their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, leaving them defenceless when the multi-national GM announced it would move production to Mexico if the strike was not immediately ended. Unifor dutifully obliged, winding up the strike and imposing yet another rotten contract that met none of the workers' demands.

The attack on workers' wages and conditions is international, as shown by recent events in France, where a union representing chemical workers agreed to a pay deal below the national minimum wage, and in Germany, where the unions are desperately seeking to prevent an explosion of working-class anger against wage stagnation and glaring social inequality.

Workers in Ontario and across Canada must reject the nationalist poison peddled by the unions, and their attempts to subordinate workers to the big business parties. To wage a counteroffensive for secure and decent-paying jobs, well-funded public services and a secure retirement, Canadian workers must adopt an internationalist and socialist program, and unite their struggles with their class brothers and sisters throughout North America and around the world to put an end to the capitalist profit system.

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