

Canada's trade unions deepen corporatist alliance with government during NAFTA talks

By Roger Jordan
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As Canada and the United States enter the final stages of bitter negotiations over a revised North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the role of Canada's union bureaucracy as a key partner of Canada's big business Liberal government is becoming ever clearer. While stoking reactionary Canadian nationalism and boasting of their role as official government advisers during the NAFTA talks, leading union bureaucrats are pulling out all the stops to prevent an eruption of the class struggle.

"I can't think of any (previous) trade agreement, ever, where labour has played any sort of an active role," blustered Unifor President Jerry Dias in a CBC interview last week in which he boasted about the unions' high-level access to government officials, including Liberal ministers. "NAFTA has been a game-changer for the labour movement and how working class people are treated as it relates to trade."

Apart from Dias' thoroughly cynical invocation of the working class, upon whom he and his fellow union bureaucrats have for decades been imposing wage cuts and other givebacks at the behest of corporate management, the Unifor president's comment contains a grain of truth. The "game changer" has been that the union bureaucracy's long-standing corporatist alliance with the government and big business has dramatically expanded over the past year, with Dias and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) head Hassan Yussuff accompanying the Liberal government's negotiating team to Washington and Mexico City.

The CLC president is a member of the government's blue-ribbon NAFTA Advisory Council, while Dias and other bureaucrats are acting as unofficial advisers to Trudeau. Dias has also held meetings with Wilbur Ross, Trump's multi-millionaire Commerce Secretary.

Dias has used his position as government partner to advocate virulent economic nationalism and protectionism, while at the same time boosting Trudeau's right-wing Liberal government as worker friendly. This began from the moment US President Donald Trump announced his intention to renegotiate NAFTA, a move hailed by Dias as offering an opportunity for workers to secure a more "progressive" trade deal.

Summing up his pro-corporate and anti-working class position, Dias applauded the framework trade agreement that the US and Mexico reached last month. Continuing Unifor's drive to divide workers along national lines, Dias gloated, "There is no question

that Mexico will lose some of the jobs that they have managed to take over the years. So, I think this is a positive development for Canada."

The unions in the United States are playing an equally reactionary role. Under conditions in which Trump, in a desperate bid to offset US imperialism's protracted economic decline, has combined economic protectionism with an intensification of the ruling-class offensive on working people by means of a trillion-dollar tax handout to the corporate elite and super-rich, top union bureaucrats have praised his NAFTA strategy. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka declared in a statement released prior to a meeting with the US president last month that Trump had made "progress."

Washington's embrace of protectionism, which has also seen it impose tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum products and threaten a 25 percent auto tariff, has thrown the Canadian ruling elite into crisis. Having for the last three-quarters of a century based the advancement of its global imperialist ambitions on its close strategic partnership with the US, Ottawa is deeply concerned that its economic and geostrategic interests will be hit hard by the surge in tensions with its neighbour to the south.

Under these conditions, the ruling elite is preparing a vast escalation of the offensive against the working class so as to claw back the billions corporate Canada is threatened with losing due to trade war or reduced access to the US market in a renegotiated NAFTA pact. The Trudeau government has let it be known that its fall Fiscal Update will focus on measures to ensure "Canadian competitiveness" in the face of Trump's tax cuts. In other words, the Liberals are preparing another multi-billion dollar handout to big business through tax cuts and business subsidies, which will be paid for through further cuts to health care and other vital public services.

Suppressing the class struggle

In Ontario, right-wing populist Premier Doug Ford has vowed to counter US protectionism, by slashing corporate taxes, regulatory limits on big business, and worker rights. On Monday he gave a foretaste of the authoritarian methods he is planning to use to force through this hard-right agenda when he announced he was invoking the Canadian Constitution's "notwithstanding clause" to slash the number of Toronto city councilors by almost half. This

reactionary provision—which has almost never before been invoked—will enable Ford’s Progressive Conservative government to annul an adverse court judgment and violate basic democratic rights “guaranteed” under the constitution’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms,.

Even more ominously, Ford has vowed he will if need be invoke the “notwithstanding clause” again, signaling that plans are well advanced to criminalize strikes and protests.

It is in this context that the unions’ waving of the Maple Leaf must be understood. Their greatest fear is that, as the global capitalist crisis intensifies and workers bear the brunt of Trump and Trudeau’s trade war measures, an independent movement of the working class in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and the social order they defend could emerge.

A prime example of this was provided by recent comments by Ontario Public Services and Employees Union President “Smokey” Thomas. Well aware that anger is approaching the boiling point among workers, Thomas inveighed against any talk of mass protests or strikes in his blog on the OPSEU website titled “Steadiness, strength and discipline: a winning combination.” With Ford having already announced plans to slash billions from public spending, imposed a hiring freeze on public servants, outlawed a strike of York University teaching assistants, and scapegoated refugees for the social crisis, Thomas preposterously hectoring his members, “I get it—your instinct may be telling you to fight. We’re all strong labour activists, and I commend you for wanting to channel your concerns into actions ...[but we don’t] even know what the Conservatives are going to do.” Thomas went on to explain that his union has already begun collaborating with the government to impose the coming onslaught, adding, “We’re already engaged in dialogue with the new government, and I’ve had a number of meetings with a host of new cabinet ministers.”

In other words, OPSEU has no intention of calling protests against the Ford government, let alone mobilizing the working class defeat the class war assault on public services and worker rights.

Protectionism and war

While the ruling class is preparing to offload the economic losses suffered by big business as a result of the rise of protectionism, Dias and his fellow union bureaucrats issue bogus statements portraying Trudeau’s Liberals as the defenders of Canadian workers. “They’re not going to fold. They’re not going to carve a bad deal just to appease the Trump administration,” asserted Dias after the NAFTA talks failed to conclude in an agreement by Trump’s self-imposed deadline of August 31.

In April, following a vociferous union lobbying campaign calling for Trudeau to clamp down on “unfair trade,” the Liberals announced the creation of corporatist aluminum and steel trade monitoring committees, which include members from industry, the government, and the unions. One of the main tasks of such committees, stated Trudeau, would be to determine whether steel and aluminum products imported into Canada were coming from countries where the pricing was too low, a clear swipe at China. The Trudeau government also handed the USW and other unions the power to bring trade grievance cases before the Canadian

International Trade Tribunal.

Last month, Finance Minister Bill Morneau announced the opening of a consultation period to impose tariffs on seven different steel products mainly produced in Asia.

The targeting of China, which the unions fully endorse, is aimed at convincing Trump to allow the Canadian bourgeoisie to operate inside his trade “walls,” as the *Globe and Mail* put it. By supporting Trump’s trade war measures against Beijing, which go hand-in-hand with US preparations for a direct military clash with China, Canada’s ruling elite hopes to diffuse the trade tensions with Washington and establish a North American protectionist bloc to assert Canadian and American imperialist interests the world over.

The unions are fully on board with this aggressive militarist agenda. They have developed the closest ties with a federal Liberal government that is committed to hiking military spending by 70 percent by 2026 and that has expanded Canada’s role in Washington’s principal military-strategic offensives, against Russia and China and in the oil-rich Middle East.

These developments underscore the aptness of the appraisal the Socialist Equality Party made of the unions in our late 2017 statement on the program required to oppose Trudeau, Trump, and the growth of militarism. We wrote, “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... Workers must beware: those who today wave Canadian and Quebec flags, inciting workers to align with their bosses against Mexican and Chinese workers, will on the morrow be the recruiting sergeants for war.”

The author also recommends

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