

Canada's unions spending millions to re-elect Trudeau's pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals

By Roger Jordan
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Canada's trade unions have spent millions of dollars on securing the re-election of Justin Trudeau and his big business Liberal Party in next Monday's federal election.

According to a CBC News analysis of Elections Canada financial reports, Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, was the single biggest donor among all individuals, corporations, and unions that mounted or funded so-called third-party election campaigns between June 30 and October 1.

The United Steel Workers union (USW) was the second biggest donor and Fairness Works, which is supported by the Canadian Labour Congress and many of its affiliates, the third biggest. In all, labour organizations accounted for more than a third of all third-party spending.

Under Canadian law, unions and business are banned from giving money to federal political parties and election candidates. But during a federal election campaign and a designated "pre-election period," they can engage in "partisan" political activities, such as advocating for or against a party or candidate, by registering with Elections Canada as a "third party." For the current election, Elections Canada, set \$1,023,400 as the maximum that a third party could spend during the pre-election period, which began June 30, and a limit of \$511,700 during the campaign.

By October 1, Unifor had already come close to the third-party funding limits, having spent over \$1.3 million of workers' dues on denouncing Andrew Scheer and his Conservatives as a singular threat to working people.

This is a continuation and intensification of the "Anybody but Conservative" campaign Unifor spearheaded in 2015 and which promoted Trudeau and his Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Stephen Harper-led Conservative government.

The unions' "Anybody but Conservative" campaign, coupled with the "Harper lite" campaign mounted by the social-democratic NDP under Thomas Mulcair, played a major role in reviving the electoral fortunes of the Liberals, who had won less than 19 percent of the vote in 2011, and catapulting Justin Trudeau into the premiership.

Today, after four years in which the Trudeau government has pursued the same basic big business agenda as Harper—austerity, attacks on democratic rights, rearmament and Canada's ever deeper integration into Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China—he and his Liberals are even more in need of Unifor's efforts to pass them off as "progressive" and "pro-worker."

Unlike Unifor, the United Steelworkers is not openly shilling for Trudeau. Its election effort focuses on promoting the NDP, the traditional party of the labour bureaucracy.

But the difference is far less than meets the eye. The NDP is no less beholden to big business than the Liberals, as exemplified by the austerity policies pursued by NDP governments wherever and whenever they have formed provincial government over the last four decades, and by the NDP's full-throated support for the Liberals' plans to spend tens of billions on new fleets of warplanes and battleships.

Moreover, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh has spent the last days of the campaign, proclaiming the NDP's eagerness to prop up a Liberal-led government in a minority parliament, or even join it in a formal coalition after October 21.

In reference to the Liberals and the NDP, Unifor President Jerry Dias told the CBC, "There's not a ton of differences and ultimately we can live with either."

Over the past four years, Unifor and the rest of the union bureaucracy have been able to "live" rather well with Trudeau's pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals. The union officialdom has developed unprecedentedly close relations with the Trudeau government. For his part, Trudeau lavishes praise on his union "partners," while enlisting their advice and support in increasing the "competitiveness," i.e. profitability, of corporate Canada.

In November 2015, just weeks after Trudeau's election victory, over 100 top union bureaucrats met with the newly-minted prime minister to promise close collaboration with the Liberal government.

True to their word, the union leaders have supported some of the Liberals' most right-wing initiatives. This includes the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade

Agreement to consolidate a North American trade bloc in alliance with Trump to prepare for trade war and military conflict with China. During the talks, Dias effectively functioned as an official government adviser, helping to give the reactionary protectionist and nationalist deal a “progressive” gloss, while lobbying for measures aimed at eliminating Mexican auto-worker jobs.

Dias and CLC President Hassan Yussuff continued to boast of their unprecedented access to Trudeau and his ministers as they unveiled plans to hike military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026, cut tens of billions from health spending over the next decade, and criminalized the fall 2018 postal workers’ strike.

Notwithstanding the Liberals’ right-wing record, the unions are once again attempting to deceive workers with promises of milk and honey if only the Tories are stopped. The CLC-funded FairnessWorks.ca website proclaims the need for a government ready to “invest in people,” “confront hate,” and secure “good jobs.” This after four years in which the CLC-backed Liberal government maintained Harper’s fiscal austerity and low taxes for corporations and the wealthy, and aided and abetted Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant crackdown.

This summer’s conventions of Unifor and the Canadian Federation of Teachers offered the Liberals a platform for their re-election campaign. Trudeau addressed both gatherings. Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, the government’s leading war-hawk, was also a featured speaker at Unifor’s convention in Quebec City.

During the convention, Dias bluntly laid out his union’s politics, telling *Maclean’s* magazine, “It’s anybody but Conservative.” As well as singing Trudeau’s praises, he applauded former Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne as “one of the most progressive leaders we’ve ever had in this country.” The Wynne government, with the full backing of the unions, imposed savage austerity measures and outlawed strikes by teachers and other workers before suffering a debacle at the polls in 2018.

The pro-NDP USW collaborated no less fully and whole-heartedly than Unifor with the Liberal government and Canadian big business in the NAFTA renegotiation.

The USW specializes in combining vulgar nationalism with explicitly pro-war, militarist positions. When Trump slapped tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum imports, the USW argued that they should be lifted because the US needs Canadian-made steel to manufacture its tanks and warplanes—an argument soon taken up by Freeland and Trudeau.

That the differences between the openly pro-Liberal and the pro-NDP factions of the union bureaucracy are a tactical disagreement over how best to defend the privileges of the

bureaucracy and their various union apparatuses is above all demonstrated by their common role in suppressing the class struggle. For decades, the pro-capitalist unions have imposed job and wage cuts and other concessions, sabotaged mass struggle against austerity like the anti-Harris mass movement of the 1990s or the 2012 Quebec student strike, and policed the anti-strike laws passed by governments of every stripe, from the Conservatives and Parti Québécois, to the Liberals and NDP.

Just ten days ago, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—the country’s largest union and one of the staunchest union-backers of the NDP—agreed to real terms wage and benefit cuts for 55,000 Ontario school support staff.

Bowing to the demands of the Ford Conservative government, CUPE accepted its “labour compensation” framework. Soon to be enacted in law, the framework limits total wage and benefit increases to 1 percent per year for the next three years.

The CUPE school support-staff agreement paves the way for the right-wing populist Ford government to impose the same wage-cutting terms on over 1 million public sector workers across the province. Moreover, it splits the province’s education workers, facilitating the government’s drive to dramatically increase class-sizes and eliminate 10,000 teaching jobs.

This betrayal must serve as a warning as to what will be the real character of a post-Oct. 21 Liberal-NDP government alliance. Like the current Liberal government, a Liberal-NDP government alliance—whether in the form of a coalition or “outside” support from Singh and his NDP—would use progressive rhetoric, identity politics, and an enhanced corporatist partnership with the unions as a smokescreen for pursuing the agenda of the bourgeoisie: rearmament, the aggressive assertion of Canadian imperialist interests around the world, and a never-ending assault on the social position and rights of the working class.

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