Out of the IMPASSE?

Debating Class Politics and Canadian Unions

Herman Rosenfeld

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Introduction

This collection of **Herman Rosenfeld's** writings provides a vital record of socialist analysis rooted in the lived experiences of Canadian labour. Drawing on his background as a shop floor worker at General Motors in Scarborough and in the education department of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW, now Unifor), this selection examines how a constantly changing capitalism seeks to reorganise workplace practices. And how, in resistance, working-class organisations must adapt, rebuild, and reimagine collective power. Across these essays, Rosenfeld argues that technological modernisations and economic "efficiencies" suggested by management are never value-neutral, but political choices that reproduce class (and other) hierarchies unless challenged by workers and their representative organisations.

In 'Lean Production Is Not a Solution,' he dissects the ideologically charged language of productivity and corporate transformation, revealing how management strategies aim to appropriate workers' knowledge while undermining workplace solidarity. Building on this premise, 'The Conflicted Transformation of CAW-Unifor,' situates the shifting priorities of Canada's largest private-sector union within the broader crisis of labour politics and absence of any mass socialist political alternative. While in 'Similar Challenges, Different Approaches,' Rosenfeld contrasts the renewed militancy of the UAW in the United States with Unifor's more cautious posture, inquiring about the possibilities that remain for a revived class politics in Canada.

Taken together – along with "No Middle Road" – these interventions remind us that worker power depends not only on shop-floor solidarity, but on building a capacity for independent collective political action by unions and workers, and a political project capable of addressing the impasse in trade union organizing and struggle in Canada as well as confronting capitalism itself.

Andrew Osborne
October 2025

Lean Production Is Not a Solution

Matt Vidal's framing of lean production as a neutral technology that provides openings for worker empowerment and participation is mistaken. It is a production system that bolsters the cost-reduction capacities of capitalist employers through an obsessive and competitive regime of intensifying work. As such, it encourages workers to compete against one another and increases their dependence on employers.

Matt Vidal's recent *Catalyst* article "The Politics of Lean Production" is a reminder of a disturbing trend among labor leaders and certain segments of the Left: the tendency to address current weakness and defeats by clinging to the coattails of management and employer programs – and projects seeking to enhance the latter's competitive interests – rather than taking on the difficult task of building worker power in workplaces and communities.

Any serious socialist analysis of the labor movement teaches a simple but powerful lesson: seeking a false sense of security, power, and respect through cosponsoring corporate workplace transformation programs and partnership projects, and hoping that concessions will provide job security, reinforces the weaknesses of union and left movements. These gambits only make us more vulnerable to work intensification, ongoing concessions, multitier workforces, and job losses. Rather than helping us to build working-class solidarity across employers and between private and public sectors, these efforts reinforce our dependence on the market success of individual employers.

Confronting work intensity, the lack of free time, poverty wages, job insecurity, and a diminishing belief that unions and workers can collectively address the realities of workplaces today requires something else. Such efforts demand a movement that represents the independent interests of workers and catalyzes forms of collective resistance, solidarity, and intelligent bargaining while soberly assessing openings, constraints, and political approaches to limit the power of private competition.

It is in this spirit that it was dismaying to find calls to embrace lean production as a road to worker power in the last issue of *Catalyst*. Vidal contends that lean production can be made to function in the interests of worker participation and workplace democracy, and, moreover, that work intensification and job loss are not key characteristics of lean production but rather the result of managerial prerogatives that harm the "efficiency and productivity" of enterprises in certain situations. Vidal argues that unions can work with managers to make lean production and corporate competitiveness beneficial for everyone. This argument couldn't be further from the truth.

Lean Production as Neutral Technology

At the core of Vidal's analysis is his presentation of lean production as an essentially neutral technology – a technology similar to computers or machine tools that is autonomous from its class origin and can be used for the benefit of workers and unions. He says, "lean production should be understood as a general (i.e., not specifically capitalist) development in the forces of production; and present evidence that deskilling, work intensification, and anti-unionism are particular capitalist strategies that are not inherent to lean production."[1] According to Vidal, the essence of lean production is not necessarily about work intensification but about forms of efficiency and productivity that workers can play a role in implementing, making their employers more competitive:

"The primary addition of lean management in this regard is the set of practices that make demand-driven, flow production possible. Specific practices developed by Toyota – kanban control for demand-driven, flow production; small lot sizes; quick changeover – combine with process ("value-stream") mapping to facilitate the reduction of buffers, hence short breaks for rest and recuperation. But whether these tools are used to intensify the work to unreasonable or dangerous levels is a function of managerial strategy, which is shaped by competitive pressures, incentives, and management logics within particular organizations or sectors."[2]

So, Vidal continues, it's only in particular circumstances that lean production will drive management to intensify work. In others, there are openings for workers and employers to collaborate to make the workplace more efficient and productive, not only without harming the interests of workers but while enriching their work experience and leading to more power.

The description of lean management as neutral or, for that matter, as a "technology" is erroneous. It is a production system, developed for the particular purpose of making capital more competitive. Lean production was originally created by Japanese auto producers to enable them to adapt to an environment of short production runs and small markets, and to take advantage of unions that had been shorn of their militancy, independence, and adversarialism. Lean management put a premium on keeping and protecting scarce financial and material resources, thus minimizing cost. It reengineered work so that it was steady, intense, and driven by a logic of never-ending effort to shave seconds off tasks, as well as a methodological obsession with finding and identifying elements that add value – and those that do not. In lean production, the notion of value is not neutral. Anything that doesn't add value is defined as "waste" and must be incrementally eliminated through continuous analysis. This is the essence of kaizen.

Waste includes the precious seconds a worker has to rest between tasks, activities that don't result in the direct transformation of the product or service to increase value, and skills that are not immediately necessary for the flow of the product or service. The result is constant and regular attacks on worker skill and autonomy. Value analysis, moreover, is not static but is – in a word afficionados of lean production love – "dynamic" and has no end point or limit. Takeji Kadota, director and principal consultant of the Japanese Management Association in Tokyo, wrote in 1970, "We disregard the conventional concept of 'a fair day's work' or the significance of 100% performance."[3] And, as the Toyota Production System Manual notes, "every minute has sixty seconds."[4] Those are seconds that can be marshaled in service of producing value-added activity. (Many employers, in fact, use computerized forms of standard data that measure work elements down to hundredths of a second.) Compounding this is lean production's focus on functional and numerical flexibility. Under lean management, the number of workers can and must be adjusted to the immediate needs of cost reduction, whether through layoffs, doing the same amount of work with fewer workers, or hiring more workers at different rates of pay, benefits, and job security.

The Universality of Lean Production – and its Effects

Lean production and its characteristic features are now used worldwide. This dissemination is partly a result of the defeat of the unions and political movements that challenged it, such as Canadian Auto Workers/Unifor and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation. This universalization of lean production can be seen in the ubiquity of lean-driven worldwide corporations such as Walmart and the logistics giant Amazon. It is tied to neoliberal globalization and capital mobility. Constantly reducing labour costs through work intensification is critical to disciplining workers through the power of competition – as an ideology as well as a material weapon.

Vidal's contention that lean production's drive to intensify work is characteristic only of workplaces in highly competitive sectors with low profit margins, such as auto assembly, is wrong. In the context of neoliberalism, all industries are subject to the imperatives of intense competition – and there are no sectors that are immune to this feature of lean production. In other words, lean management's use as a tool to reduce costs and intensify work is not a product of "particular circumstances" but of the current stage of capitalism.

Indeed, almost all forms of private enterprise are enmeshed in a hypercompetitive environment of cost reduction, driven by the ever-present threat of losing market share and investment and facing workplace closure.

In this context, lean production, and the obsessive pursuit of waste elimination in the actual labour of workers, is part and parcel of capital's drive to cut costs in an environment of competition. Lean management is not the cause of the transformation of work in this manner but a tool in the arsenal of capital. And this tool has real-world implications beyond the assembly line.

Lean production's obsession with eliminating buffers through "just-in-time" inventory processes has been applied to hospitals, for example, among other health care institutions. Running without adequate reserves of space, materials, medicines, health care workers, and personal protective equipment was a way of adapting to ongoing budget cuts and saving money. It became one of the pivotal reasons that the medical systems and hospitals of the United States and Canada lacked necessary beds, people, and other resources to respond to the dramatic rise in patients during the COVID-19 crisis. The incredible stress and burnout of health care workers and first responders was partly the result of lean practices – ironic for a system that touts its flexibility.

The entire structure of supply chains – sourcing manufacturing components to the lowest-cost producers around the globe – works in tandem with lean production. The breakdown of those supply chains, most recently in the production of computer chips and manufacturing components, remains a challenge as the pandemic continues to reappear in key sourcing spaces like China.

Lean production elements are increasingly being applied in the public sector as well in the face of austerity-driven state budgets cuts. Government institutions, from social services, planning, and regulatory agencies to everyday operations at state, municipal, and federal levels, are increasingly ordered to match private sector levels of efficiency and cost reduction. Competition between elements of the state administration, as well as with private sector service corporations, is used to discipline public sector workers and reduce the time and resources needed to serve the needs of the public.

Control, Discipline, Empowerment, and Resistance

Vidal claims that lean production creates openings for workers to shape "productivity and efficiency" in ways that do not impinge on the quality of their work experience, health and safety, and material outcomes.

Indeed, he references unions' workplace goals, such as work satisfaction, workplace democracy, and that ultimately slippery concept, "empowerment."But the essay provides little in the way of evidence demonstrating workers having actual power to shape work, products, services, or material outcomes. Productivity, in the context of competitiveness, can only mean replacing workers with technology, more output per worker, fewer workers, and a dedication to constantly reducing costs. Lean production will always seek to accomplish these outcomes – outcomes that are not necessarily the same as the goals of workers or unions – through the waste reduction mantra of constant cost identification and shaving off seconds through re-engineered work. But the ways that workers "participate" in these processes are not neutral and are not merely a reflection of happy workers being liberated from nasty managers.

Workers and unions can't really stop management's implementation of lean production programs and processes. They have little choice in the matter – employers implement their proprietary (or consultant-outsourced) production systems.

Workers and unions may comply with company-imposed rules and procedures, but the forms and degree of their compliance depend on a number of factors: whether the work reorganization is simply imposed by managers and industrial engineers or if the changes involve worker and union participation. In the latter case, they also depend on the kind and level of union and worker participation. The union could be involved in selling or cosponsoring those changes, or it can lead challenges to the process through collective bargaining or other forms of shop floor resistance.

There are no pure forms of despotic impositions of lean production, where changes are imposed with no effort to explain the necessity of making the workplace more competitive, or without appealing to the normal desire of most workers to put in a good day's work and produce a decent product or service. And there are no pure forms of voluntary appeals for workers to engage in the process of work reorganization, without workers being made aware of the pressures of competition and what might happen if the labour process isn't productive enough while they are being offered "empowerment" or participation opportunities.

Given the intensely competitive environment, along with the dreary prospect of lower-paid and less secure forms of gig work available, lean production combines despotic and voluntary approaches. The threat of workplace closure and moving work to lower-cost competitors within the same company, country, or around the world is always present. It is a shadow hanging over workers everywhere, and there is little reference to this reality in Vidal's essay.

What is really at issue isn't compliance but forms of compliance, promises of empowerment and participation, along with forms and levels of resistance – none of which are meaningfully explored in Vidal's essay.

On the flip side is the question of worker resistance and how it fits into lean production. Resistance to increased work intensity is always a feature of lean management (and any regime of work intensification), but the levels and forms of resistance are also related to the type of company program and the role of a union. Individual workers are always looking to find time for rest and ways of performing tasks that allow for small breaks. There is little sense in this essay of how worker resistance happens – either among individuals or in collective forms – and of how the mix between compliance, active participation, and resistance develops.

In both the theoretical sections of the article and the surveys and worker interviews, it is easy to see common patterns: workers are engaged in carrying out unskilled or semi-skilled tasks in ways that reduce waiting or rest times. The jobs are steady and allow more output in ways that maintain the "flow" that is so prized in the lean production universe. Tending more than one machine and allowing for process time is not a sign of increased skill but of more output per worker. It would seem that the workplaces Vidal sampled include many that are in the early stages of undergoing lean management and many that are now either out of business (maybe they didn't lean enough) or have broken the joint programs with the union because management preferred the more "despotic" approach.

In these survey reports, we hear little about resistance and a great deal about the embrace of the company's processes – along with rather thin promises and experiences with empowerment.

Compliance and Resistance with an Independent Union

The work done by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in the 1980s, '90s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century pointed in a very different direction from the one described by Vidal. The CAW's approach to lean production involved forms of resistance that functioned within the framework of management-imposed institutional constraints.

At many CAW plants, workers combined compliance, resistance, and empowerment in the sense of wanting to have some input into their work, although the forms of the latter can be much different than what Vidal proposes. What became immediately clear from speaking to workers is that the particular mix of these components and the ongoing strug-

gles around work intensification are shaped by the workplace institutions formed by management and the union in its resistance and recognition of its limitations.

There was a pathbreaking two-year study at the joint GM-Suzuki plant called CAMI Assembly that combined surveys every six months, job studies, and interviews with managers and union representatives. CAMI had assembly line members working in groups, engaged in the kaizen process and all the bells and whistles of lean production.

Workers were hired through a rigorous series of interviews that measured each applicant's capacity to make decisions but also their beliefs about working in teams, worker empowerment, making the company the most competitive, and principles identified with CAMI. In other words, they were selected partly because of their acceptance of the mantra of lean production and its promises. Many were thrilled with the pledge of having some power over their jobs and the workplace.

The workplace was divided into teams, although it had the layout of a typical assembly line. Workers were able to stop the line if there was a defect or quality problem. The teams met often and discussed production problems. Workers were encouraged to make improvement suggestions and received monetary rewards for those that were accepted.

The findings, which are detailed in Just Another Car Factory?, demonstrate how management mixed a promise of "empowerment" with a constant effort to engineer the teams to find ways of intensifying work and facilitating "efficiency."[5]

But things turned out differently than management expected. The workers, increasingly fed up with the insufferable work intensification outcomes, helped to build a strong independent union and challenged the propaganda about competitiveness and common interests with the employer. Essentially, they used the leadership and educational role of a union, along with their communication and analytical abilities – developed in part through the collective processes of working in their teams and across teams – to build unique forms of resistance.

The following is an example of how one team engaged in the process of struggling to reappropriate team members' own time from the company, analyzing each of their jobs to see how they could gain an extra team member. They made important but limited gains – always subject to further ongoing struggle with the company – using a different form of empowerment, one that challenges rather than embraces lean production. This process was captured in the CAW's film Working Lean and quoted in the book. A member of a team who is a union leader and activist describes this ongoing struggle:

"They kaizened their area … to create a floater among the team. The guy was moving around, helping everybody, unpackaging stuff, and then the company turned around and started taking the person away when there were head count problems. The team busted their ass to create the position within the team to make it a little easier for themselves. And then as soon as they did it, the company started fucking them by taking it away all the time. And the team exercised its right to refuse unsafe work a couple of times as a result of that."[6]

In the above instance, the refusals succeeded in getting the floater returned to the team. There are, in fact, more profound examples of what having some power in the workplace might mean. Swedish trade unionists pioneered forms of group work in Volvo's Uddevalla plant in the 1990s that allowed small groups of workers to assemble an entire vehicle with a cycle time up to seven hours. It was only possible to develop this project in the face of high unionization and extremely low unemployment levels. Essentially, the union was able to pressure the employer to experiment. When neoliberal globalization hit Sweden and unemployment rose, capital mobility was instituted, and competition became intense, the project was dropped.

The Myth of Progressive Competitiveness

One of the claims made in the 1990s by many social democratic politicians and theorists, corporate consultants, and union advocates about partnership with employers was that there was a form of competitiveness that would enhance the role and interests of workers as well as capital. On the political level, it was argued that enhanced education, training, and state aid could attract a mythical, putative "high-road" investment, supporting well-paid unionized workers producing goods in a democratic workplace.

Of course, this promise never materialized – whether with the decline of the vaunted Mittelstand in Germany, or in Italy's Emilio-Romagna, or anywhere in the United States and Canada. Cost competitiveness became the rule, as lean production replaced whatever supposedly skill-rich production systems may or may not have really existed.

The promise of attaining competitive success through highly trained workers with high pay, secure work, and dignity in partnership with sympathetic employers (or even with worker ownership) was, in reality, little more than work intensification, attacks on job security, workplace closures, outsourcing to cheaper suppliers, and the creation of multitiered workforces.

Vidal argues that lean production "principles and practices put

a premium on cognitive labour and the tacit knowledge of workers. My working hypothesis," he says, "is that a high-involvement approach to lean production, with substantive, widespread participation of workers in problem-solving and decision-making, is the technical frontier."[7]

But the reality is different there as well. The question is, "What problems are workers invited to 'solve,' and what constitutes them being 'solved'?" Given the nature of the production process, competition, capital mobility, and the tools of lean production, the answer is obvious: it is engaging workers in the process of figuring out (using their tacit knowledge) how to intensify their work and reduce and eliminate the numbers and security of the workforce.

Involving the Union

One of the elements of Vidal's argument is that unions can play a constructive role in facilitating and negotiating worker empowerment and participation in lean production. Of course, as the bargaining agent and collective organization of workers, unions can't simply stand by and allow management to reorganize the workplace without intervening in some way. But there are different ways of negotiating worker interests and developing independent demands in dealing with lean production, some of which I will discuss below. The approach suggested in Vidal's essay, however, is different. One of the authorities he relies on is material from Andy Banks and Jack Metzgar's 1980s work at the Midwest Center for Labor Research.[8] Summarizing their arguments from a 1989 pamphlet, Vidal writes that "Unions should make the case that by prioritizing work intensification and failing to substantively empower labor, capitalist management is harming organizational efficiency. Union co-management of lean systems would improve organizational performance."[9] He then proposes a set of principles for a joint-union management project around lean production. The principles include:

a) "Unions should adopt cost reduction as a goal … a basis for overlapping interests and partnership" with the union, which can "articulate its own approach to cost reduction" that doesn't involve "labour cost cutting and exclusively short-term considerations";

b) "Management must acknowledge that the union aims to gain influence over … all areas of the company";

c) "Management must accept that … programs and practices should

advance traditional union goals of increased job security, increased wages and benefits, and improved working conditions";

d) Independent union coordinators;

e) An organizing model to support the union's goals.[10]

This model undermines the key strengths and power of unions and ends up selling management's lean production goals. The vision assumes that a successful capitalist enterprise – in terms of profit and competitiveness – is a goal of a union. It is not. Certainly, unions are dependent on the relative success of a given employer or sector, but the goal of an independent union is not to enhance that dependence but to limit it through solidarity across sectors and the working class, not by strengthening the employer's competitive position.

Adopting cost reduction as a goal means endorsing the inevitable pull of competition. There is no "progressive" way of engaging in competitive cost reduction. By making that your goal, you have already given up the fight for workers. Influencing management at different levels could mean challenging them or it could mean pressuring them to be more effective at what you have both adopted as your goal: cost reduction. It is almost as if Vidal is making a distinction between "bad" management that is not adequately reducing costs and "good" management that is doing it effectively, which the union will support and advocate for. But, like Jane Slaughter and Mike Parker wrote in the already cited Labor Research Review pamphlet in response to Banks and Metzgar, this is not the role of a union.[11]

At the end of the day, it is impossible to carve out work organization as exempt from cost reduction, and it is naive to think this is possible within the parameters of competitive capitalism. Management can recognize the traditional goals of unions, but they see them as costs – which they are – and will never prioritize them. Having an independent union coordinator means nothing. Most problematic is the way Banks and Metzgar (and Vidal) define an "organizing model." Unbelievably, they believe it means organizing workers to lobby with shareholders and communities or use militant tactics to embarrass ineffective managers and push for more effective ways of cutting costs![12]

The CAW's programs to challenge lean production in the 1990s and 2000s were much different. The union's goal wasn't to help management cut costs. Realizing that it couldn't stop lean production from coming into workplaces, CAW had a multipronged strategy of bargaining limita-

tions on management's agenda. One could characterize this as a form of cooperation, but it occurred through bargaining and started from a very different place than the one articulated by Vidal, Banks and Metzgar, and others like them. It included:

- Clear statements of the union's goals and interests, as part of any bargained agreement;

- Having management pay for members' union education – independent of the employer – about the nature and goals of lean production and ways of challenging efforts to intensify work;

- Acknowledging that there is a difference between "team concept," which is an effort to pressure workers to intensify work, and working in teams or small groups. With an independent union agenda and presence, teamwork can be made to facilitate workers' ability to use collective efforts to limit intensification, improve working conditions, and push for adequate staffing to limit peer pressure. This is what unions did at CAMI and Mazda's Flat Rock plant in Michigan (in the latter case, United Auto Workers);

- Bargaining pilot projects in specific locations inside the workplace, with limited time frames and clearly understood ground rules;

- Closely analyzing and monitoring planned management programs and bargaining limits to management power;

- Identifying jobs that are particularly intense and difficult and negotiating ways of improving them; Realizing that a "militant refusal" of any compromise is usually not possible – but if the union educates the membership and provides space for the rank and file to challenge management's unilateral power to impose work intensification, power can be built over time.

This program was facilitated by a larger union education program on challenging the team concept, lean production, and efforts to get the workers to buy into the principles of competitiveness. The educational component emphasized that competitiveness isn't something to embrace but rather must be recognized as a constraint. Unions are sometimes forced to make compromises that they wouldn't voluntarily make.

A successful union strategy also requires limiting and building beyond dependence on employers' competitiveness, through collective action to learn what our limits are and how to push them forward, and to bring workers into political projects that curb employer power.

The union's insistence on its independent principles and set of demands is essential when bargaining agreements on how to handle lean production. Whether agreements work for an extended time or the employer decides to refuse to deal with the union, bargaining provides a way for workers and unions to deal with these situations and allows them to move forward.

Conclusion

In the end, Vidal summarizes his long-term goal: to build a partnership with capital that redefines efficiency in ways that exclude forms of cost savings that "negatively impact worker health and safety" and the environment:

"Rather than fighting productivity and efficiency as inherently bad for labor, unions should politicize them and offer a vision for achieving flexibility and continuous improvement via a high-involvement approach with institutionalized forms of worker participation – supported by their own performance analyses and proposals for process improvements, and backed by social movements and militant tactics."[13]

As a socialist and a Marxist with decades of work in the union movement, I couldn't disagree more with this kind of effort to bolster capitalist employers. It is the very antithesis of a healthy, independent, and class-struggle-oriented approach for the trade union movement. Instead, it strengthens the forces that encourage workers to compete against one another, increases workers' dependence on their employers, and confuses and compromises clear thinking and the kind of analysis necessary to challenge employers.

There is nothing here about dramatically increasing the social wage, eliminating tiering of the workforce, lessening workers' ties to the boss, bringing key sectors into public ownership, limiting capital mobility, or producing carbon-free goods that could serve social uses, such as mass transit and integrating into a larger planned economic project. This might introduce real possibilities for different worker roles in every stage of the process, keeping the interests of the class as a whole in mind. Vidal's vision is about making neoliberal capitalism work for a group of workers – hardly the future that socialists hope to build.

I close with a proverb popular with auto management in the '90s. It is still being used:

Every morning in Africa, a gazelle awakens. He has only one thought on his mind: to be able to run faster than the fastest lion. If he cannot, he will be eaten.

Every morning in Africa, a lion awakens. He has only one thought on his mind: to be able to run faster than the slowest gazelle. If he cannot, he will die of hunger.

Whether you choose to be a gazelle or a lion is of no consequence. It is enough to know that, with the rising of the sun, you must run. And you must run faster than you did yesterday, or you will die. •

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The Conflicted Transformation of CAW-Unifor: A Review of *Shifting Gears*

Recent commentaries on the political trajectory of the major private sector union in Canada, CAW-Unifor, have often had a rather simplistic and problematic perspective. That the CAW-Unifor (the latter being the new name and re-foundation of the union in 2013) drifted from a left, struggle-oriented approach, summarized in the slogan "Fighting back makes a difference," toward a more collaborative centrist and Gomperist political approach, as the union distanced itself and ultimately moved away from the New Democratic Party (NDP).

The new book by Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, *Shifting Gears: Canadian Autoworkers and the Changing Landscape of Labour Politics* (UBC Press, 2024), is, in contrast, a thoughtful, and well researched

historical analysis of the transformation of the political orientation and role of the union. [See video of book launch.] Written by two accomplished labour studies scholars, the book touches on critical contradictions and structures that underpin union behaviour, drawing upon both documentary sources and a series of interviews with union members, the broader labour movement, and labour studies scholars and commentators. (One being this reviewer.)

The analysis and narrative works quite well. It describes the dialectic and forces that drove that process that led the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) away from the social democratic NDP, through initially embracing a left rejection of the progressive competitiveness strategies that emerged in the 1990s and neoliberal globalization, but eventually moving toward an accommodation with business unionism, strategic voting and forms of partnership with employers, and the NDP's parallel move toward a fundamental acceptance (and embrace) of the limits and essential components of neoliberal globalization, as social democratic parties around the world have done.

There are, however, some theses and contentions that merit discussion. There is a somewhat narrow portrayal of the reasons for the NDP's and social democracy's inability to provide needed support for the working-class and the union movement in the neoliberal period; a reliance on the somewhat elastic concept of social unionism that fails to capture both its limits and its lack of clarity and flexibility. The book glosses over the significance of policy differences across the union movement at critical periods and the real educational and organizational efforts of CAW to embed challenges to dominant neoliberal ideas and practices, such as competitiveness and globalization.

The Political Dilemmas of the Union

The basic narrative, however, is clear and provides an historical, political, and structural underpinning for the current impasse. The United Auto Workers (UAW) Canada and the CAW had a close relationship with the NDP, and the union, for the most part, adopted the social democratic framework of that party. The union had a social unionist approach, which it inherited from the (President of UAW, 1946-1970) Walter Reuther leadership in the US. It was a rather elastic concept, which in its best moments, argued that the union had to broaden its approach to fight for more than collective bargaining gains, to embrace the needs of working-class people and society as a whole for social justice and equality, and social, political, and to support economic rights at home and abroad.

While the union supported the NDP electorally, the latter worked to enact needed legislative reforms, with the union maintaining its own autonomous practices and policies. It reflected the union's commitment to articulating a voice, independent of, but in partnership with, its political ally. Referred to as 'syndicalism', it was a stubborn effort to maintain its values and not subordinate them to electoral partners. This was an embedded part of the union's history, as was its efforts to maintain its own relationships with governments and working relationships with employers all the while.

As Sam Gindin notes, "in this way, the UAW parted from how other unions with strong partisan ties to the NDP thought about union political action. In general, unions with partisan allegiances to the NDP contracted out their politics to the party. However, the division of labour was not as clear-cut in the UAW insofar as the union always maintained its own political capacity to influence policy directly" [emphasis added] (p. 41).

Into the 70s, the NDP worked to win and deepen basic social democratic reforms and policies that the UAW and other unions supported. Of note was the 1972-1974 Liberal minority government, pressured by the NDP. It was the most nationalist and ambitious set of policies that the Liberals and NDP were able to embrace in that era and included Petro Canada and the Foreign Investment Review Board. As well, NDP influence on minority governments in Ontario in the mid-1970s facilitated the passing of legislation that ensured the right to refuse unsafe work.

As the 1980s unfolded, Labour's ties to the NDP were strained by what the authors call Social Democratic Electoralism (putting the desire to get elected and distancing itself from the labour movement ahead of championing basic principles and reforms that would further the interests of working people). The union and the party moved in opposite directions. Citing commentators such as Charlotte Yates, the authors note that the party was moving away from its "social democratic principles," while the CAW was becoming more militant with more radical political demands (pp. 48-49).

The authors cite policy differences as well, such as the Canada-US "Free Trade election" of 1988, where Ed Broadbent's Federal NDP refused to make free trade a central political concern, ceding the issue to the Liberals. It was underpinned by the party's reticence to be seen as being too close to unions. The party's role in the election became an issue not only with the CAW but also with the Steelworkers.

The Bob Rae-led NDP majority government in Ontario's social

contract of 1992 led to a more serious division as the latter attacked public sector union contracts and betrayed a belief that public-sector spending and workers should bear the blame and burden for deficits, essentially endorsing austerity. The refusal of the NDP to challenge the strictures of neoliberalism here helped to set the stage for the eventual election of the 'Common Sense Revolution' of 1995 of Mike Harris and the Conservative Party.

The political and policy fiasco of the Rae years was a watershed moment in the relationship between the CAW and the NDP. It was mirrored by similar Third Way approaches that embraced much of the policy regime of neoliberalism in NDP provincial governments across the country and the policies of the federal party, as well as by social democratic parties in Europe.

At the time, the CAW was articulating a more radical perspective on both the strategic and tactical terrain of labour politics as well as on the policy level. This was the period of debate within the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and across the larger labour movement between the CAW, Teacher's unions, CUPW, CUPE, and much of the public sector, on the one hand, and the so-called Pink Paper group, (including the Steelworkers (USWA), United Commercial and Food Workers (UFCW), Machinists (IAM) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP)) on the other. It dealt with the relationship to the NDP but also differences over how to respond to neoliberalism. The term 'pink paper' came from the color of the paper the latter's manifesto was written on.

The adoption of both strategic voting – only supporting candidates that can defeat the Conservatives, rather than automatically getting behind the NDP – and a more class struggle/direct action approach to fighting governments and employers came in the wake of the failure of the Rae government and the election that put Mike Harris's PCs in office. The OFL, pushed by the CAW and public sector unions, organized the Ontario Days of Action, a series of one day general strikes against employers, in cities across province, in conjunction with coalitions of social activists and community organizations in each community.

The NDP played a marginal role in the Days of Action, and the Pink Paper unions for the most part refused to strike employers on the protest days, but did help to organize and participated in the actual demonstrations. The move away from the NDP partnership and the embrace of more radical forms of political actions followed from this period.

The relationship was further strained by the union's concern that the NDP's lack of electoral success would weaken the union's power to

influence outcomes. At the same time, the left in the union saw the moderating drift of the NDP as creating a space for embracing a more radical set of politics, and as well, a more radical strategic and tactical approach (mass protests, strikes, support for social movements, and others).

The Years of Leading the Left

For a period, the CAW positioned itself as a key left force, a kind of a stand-in for a party. It organized a number of workplace occupations, identified itself with the Days of Action, argued against lean production, team concept, and "progressive competitiveness," and looked to find a politics beyond neoliberalism.

But while embracing different policies and a more radical strategic orientation for a time, the constraints on the union operating as a stand-in for a non-existent political left eventually took their toll. As time went on, in the face of the relentless deepening of neoliberalism and the pressures it placed on the union and the working-class (end of auto pact, plant closures, layoffs, bankruptcies, etc.), the union itself began to moderate its policies and embraced policies that it had eschewed and debated in the past, such as progressive competitiveness, calling for subsidizing employers, concessions, and so forth.

Politically, this was accompanied by not a move to the left but rather by the increasing embrace of Gomperist strategies – rewarding politicians who support the union's short term interests and goals – as opposed to allying with the NDP in the electoral sphere. The union was clearly not in a position to create an alternative itself; and the socialist left outside the union was disorganized, small, and immature, much to the chagrin of those of us who had celebrated this break as an opening toward a more left political orientation.

The anti-globalization demonstrations and movement were important and gave rise for a brief period a so-called 'Teamsters and Turtles alliance' between unions and social movements. The movement engaged an entire stratum of CAW members from auto and other sectors (but is slighted in the book). Post 9/11 and the US-led 'War on Terror', the anti-globalization movement faltered, and the union leadership became defensive, rather than inspirational or mobilizing. Given the top-heavy leadership structure of the CAW, notably the central power of the president's office, what was previously a base for energizing an alternative political direction became increasingly used to lower expectations and limiting of workplace militancy and independence from employers. The leadership used the union's institutions to increasingly 'manage expectations'.

"External economic pressures were increasingly internalized by the union's leadership to justify shifting gears politically" (p. 17). The authors document the descent of the union on the economic and bargaining terrain, moving toward a strategy of seeking subsidizing of auto employers and sustaining the competitive positioning of the firms. This included, most controversially, looking to make unprincipled deals with other employers, as in the grossly misnamed "Framework for Fairness" bargained with Frank Stronach's notoriously anti-union Magna.

Ross and Savage note, "As the political-economic landscape has shifted, so too have the political perspectives of the union's leaders charged with advancing the interests of the union members, leading to a significant reordering of political strategies" (p. 237).

The authors comment that both the NDP and the CAW embraced a defensive and unsuccessful effort to moderate the worst features of neoliberalism. The union did this through conceding the necessity of competitiveness, bargaining concessions, organizing for state subsidization of employers, and working with Liberals in their strategic voting approach. The NDP, in accepting the limits of the state, dependence on private capital competitiveness, and embracing austerity, looked to become the champion of small business and separated itself from working-class identities and interests. Neither the union nor the NDP adopted the kind of politics necessary to challenge neoliberalism.

The analysis of Ross and Savage of the founding and role of Unifor rejects the claims of some of the activists in the founding of the new union and contends that the new union project continued the same political and bargaining patterns and contradictions as its CAW predecessor. From the political alliances with Trudeau, partnership approaches to bargaining, and economic policies, to the failure of claims to create new forms of community unions, the challenges and contradictions remain much the same in a much more precarious moment, on a larger scale considering climate change, the need to move off of fossil fuels, and critical economic transformations on the horizon. (See "The CAW-CEP Merger: New Union in a Difficult World," *The Bullet*, September 26, 2012.)

In the final chapter of Shifting Gears, Ross and Savage consider different possibilities of moving forward. The comments are somewhat contradictory: from those who see the move away from the NDP as an error, such as Andrew Jackson (p. 42), to those who argue that an independent socialist political party and movements remains a sine qua non for any alternative transformation of the union movement.

Shifting Gears does not take a position on whether or not the

break with the NDP by Unifor facilitated the union's move to the right. But they acknowledge that any attempt of a union such as Unifor to maintain an orientation that can stand to the left of neoliberal capitalism requires a political party and movement that challenges the system, organizes and educates to fight it, and argues for a project of social transformation. As they note, "a strong and dynamic union cannot substitute for a left-wing political party" (p. 251).

As well, Ross and Savage emphasize that any change requires education and mobilization. This is not just at the top level of a union, and through statements and pamphlets; but also through engaging and building in workplaces among workers in plants and offices, at all levels of the union.

Past and Present: Key Struggles Facing the Labour Movement

Ross and Savage do an impressive job of making sense out of an extremely complex historical set of experiences for CAW-Unifor and the wider union movement. Their analysis not only encourages reflection about strategic decisions of the past, but also begs for further speculation and debate about the direction of where the union movement might go in the future.

Social Democracy and the Problem of Social Democratic Electoralism

Shifting Gears treads lightly on defining and describing the nature of social democracy. It is often used interchangeably with 'social unionism'; and it quite loosely refers to as acting in the interests of social justice, equality, and some form of politics that claims to support workers interests. The acceptance of the permanence of the capitalist system, and its adjustment to articulate its interests with neoliberalism, is never identified as being central to social democracy. The problem is cited as "electoralism," or the opportunistic desire to break social democracy's – and in particular, the NDP's – popular identification with the working-class, so as to get elected as the champion of the so-called middle class, small business, and society as a whole.

Certainly, that is a real issue. But making it central is a mistake. The authors do not analyze the limitations of social democratic politics itself, whether tracing it from the Reuther period, or identifying

its capitulation to neoliberalism and globalization in recent decades. Social democracy, at least from the post-war era on, has been marked by an acceptance of the limitations of dependence on private capital accumulation, and at its best, has looked to initiate important social welfare reforms and forms of regulation, to challenge the inequalities and hardships faced by working people by the market system, rather than taking on the system itself.

When the crisis of the 1970s initiated the move toward neoliberalism, social democracy turned toward limiting its reform agendas and accepted the inevitability of austerity and neoliberal globalization. The break with the working-class identity is part of this transformation and can describe the NDP in its current and recent incarnation as well as its sister parties in every country where social democracy exists.

The CAW's roots in the social democratic milieu were somewhat mitigated by its autonomy, the syndicalist trend (which had a right and left component), and the role of the socialist left that was never completely exterminated from the Union and played an important role in underpinning Bob White's (founding president of CAW, 1985-1992) challenge to the concessions regime in the UAW, and support for Canadian working-class autonomy.

Social Unionism

Social unionism is a very elastic and flexible concept and was clearly used by different groupings within the union – from those who were rooted in the Reuther tradition and saw themselves as distinct from the narrow business unionism of the AFL, identifying their role as standing for social equality and a series of social democratic reforms. To an extent, it also referred to the struggle against racism, segregation, and the rights of women, immigrants, and sexual minorities.

Many of those reforms were won through bargaining with employers (more so in the US than in Canada) and led to the creation of what has been called the 'private welfare state'. Although this form of strong social unionism was progressive and important in its time, it was limited by its social democratic ideological content. It was not part of a challenge to the social system and in many ways ended up reinforcing the dependence that workers and unions have on capital through the practices of 'social partnerships'. As a partner through various forms of corporatism, unions double-down on the dependence on the company and its successes in profits, competitiveness, and capital accumulation (directly through private employers, indirectly in the

public sector's through fostering a business-friendly environment for private accumulation).

While the UAW easily slid into concessions and celebrations of competitiveness, eventually, the CAW did as well, although the role of leadership, the left, and other factors mitigated this process for a time. Shifting Gears notes that without a politics of social transformation operating in some form, this was inevitable.

Of course, as the authors note, there are all kinds of ways that social unionism can be defined – from a strong sense of social justice (but limited within a social democratic framework), to simply identifying with broader community (read cross-class) charity projects.

The Pink Paper Challenge

There are several critical moments when the CAW argued against others in the union movement – as well as in the NDP – from a position considerably to the left of social democracy that are overlooked in Shifting Gears. The most notable was the debate with the Pink Paper unions in the mid-1990's, and the issue was much deeper than whether or not to support the NDP. The CAW argued that it was wrong to build partnerships with employers in order to make the latter more competitive in international markets; this would weaken the union and ultimately lead it to embrace forms of concession and job loss. The idea that an economic strategy can be built by enhanced corporate training, team concept, 'empowerment', and lean production was a recipe for failure. Developing the creative and productive capacities of society and workers was not the same as making them partners with employers whose goal is to cut costs and make the most profits for investors (or even worse, lure workers or their unions into becoming investors).

The Pink Paper document and unions criticized the costs of the public sector and a reliance on creating public services and productive capacities seen as being non-competitive. This was precisely the position of the NDP and was similar to other social democratic parties that were accommodating neoliberalism in their policy platforms. This type of thinking was also the basis for the reticence of many unions to strike employers or sanction wider strike actions for fears it would hurt competitiveness as well as the electoral ambitions of the NDP.

The Ontario Days of Action

The one-day general strikes against the savage austerity cuts of the Ontario government from 1995-98 involved much more than a spontaneous militancy and direct action by unions and workers in communities. They were only possible because activists in CUPE, CUPW, Teachers' unions, CAW, and others took up the responsibility to educate local unionists about the necessity of opposing the Harris agenda, educating their co-workers, and pressuring their employers to stop supporting Harris. This was a critical opening for developing the capacity to understand and challenge neoliberal ideology. The Days played an important role in future actions by the union around plant occupations, differentiating the union from the NDP, and later on, building a base for the rank-and-file workers to fight against the globalization agenda in the latter part of the decade.

The links made in communities where the strikes were held between union and social movements was also critical. Although the relative balance of resources between these different components of the working-class were not equal, it was also a moment with the potential to create a different set of working-class institutions and politics independent of the NDP. Because there was no organized political left, nothing was built and the legacy of the strikes lost. This period bears more discussion than undertaken for what it meant for internal CAW politics, but also for what it reveals about the failures of the socialist left to build new experiments and parties as other countries were attempting. There was an opening and potential to move the left ahead, but the politics of the socialist left in Canada was simply not ambitious or mature enough. And both the union and socialist movements have suffered – even declined – since.

The Anti-Globalization Movement

It is surprising that Ross and Savage didn't reference the inspiring role that CAW played in contributing to the anti-globalization mobilizations of the late 1990's, and the potential that it could have played in enabling the political development of the union movement to limit the drift of the NDP and the social democratic centre to the right and neoliberal politics. This would have also meant moving to the left in the steady closure and polarization of political options in the face of a radicalizing capitalist classes in North America.

Activists and staffers in the CAW – some of whom had long

been NDP loyalists – took the lead in developing a series of educational initiatives that were combined with mass actions. The demonstrations against the Organization of American States (OAS) in Windsor changed what had originally been a celebration by the local union movement of community recognition by the establishment of business and government leaders, into a massive political learning experience. As a result, hundreds of young workers became active in the anti-globalization movement and took to the buses in Quebec City against the WTO months later (reflecting the same level of frustration as everyone else by not being able to 'go to the wall').

Unfortunately, 9/11 and the embarrassing defensiveness of the union's leadership in the face of the bombing, helped to put a chill on this movement. But it is important to understand that up to this point, the union was clearly moving to the left, and the energy and learning should have and could have been nurtured, not just in the leadership strata, but amongst rank-and-file workers. That it was not tells a great deal about the road not taken and the road that was by CAW-Unifor.

Green Jobs Oshawa

The Green Jobs Oshawa (GJO) initiative, organized by workers, academics, and retirees, to challenge the closure of the General Motors (GM) Oshawa Plant in 2019 is left out of *Shifting Gears*. This is a significant omission for it is an example of the potential for working-class alternatives that has remained within the union. The project proposed that the plant be transformed into a publicly owned production facility for needed electric-powered vehicles, to serve public and community needs such as the postal and other government services. As well, that it become part of a larger sector that could be part of a planned move to create different forms of ecologically-responsible production for need.

GJO was opposed by the Unifor leadership and the local union but was one of the first such projects in Canada in this era to introduce the idea of creating a worker-initiated plan for conversion, away from dependence on fossil fuels and breaking with dependence on the whims and investment concerns of US multinational auto companies and not subordinate to the requirements of competitive markets.

When GM agreed to keep the plant open by assembling overflow production of trucks, the GJO movement was put on hold. While GJO failed to build a sustained movement within the local union and community, it pointed the way forward for engaging workers and unions in the process of converting the economy toward an ecosocialist future.

Lessons from that experience – negative as well as positive – after all, it did fail – are critical for building a base for union transformation.

[Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge]

Challenges Remain

In glossing over key left political initiatives like GJO in the union's history, Shifting Gears fails to fully to appreciate the genuine potentials – the suppressed alternative – that were part of the union's history, as well as its (and other unions') potential in the future. A socialist political movement or party, bringing together the various components of the working-class, advocating, educating, and mobilizing around a class struggle approach, and looking to build a movement that challenges dependence on private capital could have created the basis for a consistent left current in the labour movement and nurture the left in the CAW-Unifor. The absence of such a left is deeply felt in the declining role of the union movement in leading social struggles in Canada as it had for a century. Left Socialist politics of some kind might have been able to limit or prevent the move toward the right in the union, but even after the openings presented by the social contract debates, the Days of Action building across the different sectors of the working-class, and later, the anti-globalization movement and Green Jobs Oshawa, the lack of such a movement or party became evident.

Shifting Gears is an impressive achievement. It covers over half

a century of union history and traces the political evolution of Canada's most interesting and iconic union, and opens up for debate about organizational strategy and political struggle in Unifor and the Canadian union movement as a whole. While many of the underlying crisis factors facing the union movement are acknowledged, there is much less said about how to address them.

Given the huge challenges of the larger union movement unable to grow into sectors such as massive growth in the distribution and logistics sectors. Failure to establish an organizing wave in these new sectors and with new workers is the most visible sign of the impasse of the Canadian labour movement. But with the disarray and decline of the political centrism of social democracy, the workers' movement in Canada (and elsewhere) is politically disarmed and ideologically confused. Workers have been a first target by a resurgent right-wing in both Canada and the US. In place of the fragmented and ineffective socialist left that now exists, building a new socialist politics tied to the centres of working-class life in unions and workplaces is the order of the day. •

This piece was originally published on socialistproject.ca in December 2024. It is a review of Shifting Gears: Canadian Autoworkers and the Changing Landscape of Labour Politics *(UBC Press, 2024) by Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage.*

No more middle road

It is refreshing to read Andrew Jackson and Scott Sinclair's challenge to the anticipatory obedience rush by the Canadian bourgeoisie and key components of the state and policy-making community in the face of Trump's threats of the 25 percent tariffs. And we should welcome the appeal by these Canadian left economist-activists that "Canadian progressives should also consider what is needed to build a more self-reliant, resilient and fairer national economy fit for the new international disorder."

The problem, though, is three-fold. First, while Trump is known for his rhetoric about shaking up certain elements of the status quo, it's hard to distinguish between his bluster and any real strategic perspective, so for now at least it is unclear if we are really facing a high level of "new

international disorder." Given the pivotal role the US capitalist class plays in the world, it is debatable whether Trump or the key centres of American capital and state wish to radically overhaul or replace key components of the neoliberal regime, such as the free movement of capital and investment, supply-line management that favours low-cost manufacturing venues, the larger so-called "rules-based structures of trade and investment" and the integration of Canadian and American markets, including the dependence of the former on the latter.

Second, there is the call by Jackson and Sinclair to bring back the set of demands the left raised during the free trade debate of 1988, such as energy and public procurement rules, 'sensible' limits on intellectual property rights, regulation of foreign investment and some degree of independent economic strategies (other then increasing dependence and guaranteeing access to US markets). These were moderate, left-centrist demands that were supported by the entire left back in the day. While many of the goals still remain, they are impossible to even consider in this era of US (and Canadian state) enforcement of the sanctity of private investment, capital mobility and other components of the neoliberal order – not to mention the integration of Canadian and US markets and investment powers – without completely challenging the legitimacy of the rules of the game and the fundamental structures underpinning the capitalist economy in Canada. That would have to include public ownership of key sections of the economy, severe limits on capital mobility, addressing the climate crisis by subordinating the fossil fuel industry, controlling and democratizing banks and the financial system, and introducing a democratic planning regime that would allow a transition to a more endogenous economic approach, conversion of workplaces and industries to environmentally sustainable production and service provision, as well as controlling, limiting and managing trade, and transforming immigration and social policy to fit a different kind of economy.

The Canadian capitalist class as a whole would clearly oppose any of this, along with governments and state actors. So, in order to even address the moderate (seemingly radical in today's thoroughly neoliberalized environment) approach that Jackson and Sinclair raise as a framework, and that we all defended in the 1988 free trade debate, we would need a radical transformation, of the kind outlined above. The era of a centrist or a moderately nationalist left-of-centre program, which would use the Canadian state to address the competitive and productivity issues of Canadian economic activity, is over. The choices today, unfortunately, are stark – either tinker with the current economic regime, in ways that make Canadian companies more competitive and successful in US or

other international markets (the latter utterly dominated by the rules of the game controlled by the US and enforced by national governments, like Canada), or adopt the radical approach that I outlined. There is no way for the moderate, left-of-centre approach to work within the larger neoliberal world economy. Unless the latter is subverted, or challenged with a new political project, the kinds of alternatives proposed in Jackson and Sinclair's article (including an expanded social safety net and caring sector) cannot come to be.

The third problem is that neither the demands raised by Jackson and Sinclair nor the major structural transformations I have mentioned can come about without building a new political movement driven by a mobilized working class with an awakened class consciousness. However, that kind of a political movement has no reality in Canada or the US today. Nor is there any party that embodies those aims. The labour movement is small and, although involved in fighting the effects of stagnant wages and living conditions of the past decades, is decidedly apolitical, in the sense of not challenging the system in any substantive way.

Considering the forms of social dislocation a genuine challenge to the current neoliberal regime would entail, simply calling on a party to put them forward wouldn't work either. Support and understanding for this kind of transformational outlook has to be built by a party that can rally working people across the country and build support in workplaces and communities. Key reforms – components of a deeper approach to change, such as calling for nationalizing banks (or creating alternative forms of investment funds, such as the Canadian Labour Congress raised when Andrew Jackson was research director) need to come from real, on-the-ground political movements and parties.

Clearly, this will not happen overnight and may never happen at all, but the discontent with the sickening genuflection of the Canadian bourgeoisie and governments to the US could help spark projects of resistance across the country. •

This piece was originally published on socialistproject.ca in December 2024. It is a response to "Canada and the new world disorder" (Canadian Dimension, 2024) by Andrew Jackson and Scott Sinclair.

Similar Challenges, Different Narratives: A Tale of Two Unions

The 2023 auto bargaining between the auto unions and the Detroit "Big 3" is shaking out to be different in a way that few of us could have imagined. The objective conditions favour an environment of working-class gains, with some countervailing factors. Job markets favour workers, despite a post-COVID inflationary period and high interest rates used to force neoliberal levels of inflation. Workers across the economies of both the US and Canada have been looking to make up for the huge losses resulting from previous concessions (since the early 2000s and inflation and the recent inflationary period).

The strike and rejection of the first tentative agreement at Metro and the important but limited gains in the UPS bargaining in the US were positive, but the weakness and defeat of the labour movement in both countries has kept strike levels down and made the task difficult. The auto companies are making enormous profits, and the top executives have rewarded themselves handsomely.

The entire auto sector, less strategically important in the overall economy than before – given the rise of logistics – is at the cusp of a key transformation coming through an initial $90-billion move from internal combustion to electric vehicles (an absolute necessity for environmental as well as competitive reasons). Much of this is being backed by or financed in the US by the Biden Administration's investment strategy, and some through Canadian government subsidies of battery plants. This makes them vulnerable to labour action.

The contracts with the Detroit companies on both sides of the US-Canada border ended at the same time, opening the way for a strategic partnership of sorts between the US International UAW and Canada's Unifor. But this hasn't really happened. Instead, there is a basic difference in the strategic approach being taken by the two auto unions, in a way that looks to have flipped the historic relationship between the traditionally more conservative- and 'partnership'-oriented American union and what used to be its Canadian section, born in the fight against concessions free trade, subservience to the ideology of competitiveness and neoliberalism and for the democratic rights of Canadian workers to control their union.

The UAW is taking on all three companies at the same time – GM, Stellantis, and Ford – in a hard-fought strategic set of strikes, underpinned by a language and spirit of larger class struggle, targeting the "billionaire class" and the fact of the corporate CEOs earning salaries 300 times greater than the average autoworker. The Canadian auto union, Unifor,

avoided any real struggle and the kind of movement-oriented approach of the UAW. Instead, they 'competently' managed to bargain an agreement with Ford that, while making major monetary gains, only passed by 54%. This raised other questions and issues and reportedly was voted down by a majority of skilled trades workers.

Why has this happened? What are the implications for the future of these unions, and in particular, Unifor and autoworkers in Canada? What are some of the likely outcomes?

Tale of Two Approaches

Unifor handled auto bargaining in a way much like their previous big three bargaining sessions. They met with the bargaining teams of each company, summarized the main issue areas, made a series of general statements of member demands and priorities, chose a target company (based on their strategic vulnerability and their union's advantage), and bargained an agreement at Ford. Once a tentative settlement was reached, they circulated summaries of the main gains in the contract the day before an on-line ratification vote was held at each local union.

Little effort was made to build a campaign amongst the membership around a clear series of key demands – instead, lots of generalities and cliches were voiced but never a clear articulation of the key items that the union was fighting for, and the larger reasons for featuring them, such as ending tiers (and the way that tiering of segments of the workforce, doing the same job, but not having the same wages, benefits or pension rights, creates division and undermines faith and support for the union), making up for concessions of the past through base rate increases and reinstitutions of COLA; bringing back defined benefit pensions and improving pensions of existing retirees. There were no rallies, public demonstrations, or internal educational work, to communicate the centrality of even the generalities put forward by the union.

Clearly articulating key demands within the membership, the general public, and the larger working class raises hopes and aspirations, and challenges the union to deliver on these promises. It forces the union to arm the members with explanations and arguments against the inevitable backlash from employers and the business media, and also instills confidence. It contributes to a sense of working-class identification. Of course, it also involves the risks for the union being able to deliver, but it is essential when dealing with a critical struggle.

The message put forward around the Unifor bargaining, at least upon entering the Ford negotiations and after the settlement, was that it

was being handled by competent leaders and experts, who managed in a way that would maintain good relationships with the companies. Even the beginning of the bargaining process was placed in a context of seeking common interests for the workers and companies.

The Ford agreement was ratified with no real time for workers to digest and discuss the contents, and inexplicably, without ratification meetings; voting was done online. They certainly could no longer argue that COVID was a factor. As a result, there was no time to think about the agreement and no space to discuss and debate issues raised there.

Pattern bargaining – choosing one company to bargain a pattern to become a template for negotiating with the other companies – is really not an issue here. But the lack of creativity and a sense of needing to do things differently was just not there.

After years of union concessions – introducing tiers, temp work, wage stagnation, benefit cuts, reducing break time, defined contribution pensions for lower tier and new hires, getting rid of COLA, and accepting lean production work intensity – workers were looking for leadership and confidence, especially when they saw what was happening in the UAW.

The UAW handled things differently. The new leadership clearly summarized the critical issues that needed be addressed in the contract and organized internal education with the members. Public rallies were held and broadcasts made on social and mainstream media. UAW President Shawn Fain put his reputation and that of the union on the line in arguing that the union needed to settle these key issues in order to reach an agreement.

In the process, Fain used a language and framework of class struggle and the antagonistic interests between the working class and what he called "the billionaire" class. Comparisons of worker incomes and wages were made with the massive salaries of CEOs (over $20-million): Mary Barra of GM, Jim Farley of Ford and Carlos Tavares of Stellantis.

Even the opening of bargaining was characterized by an approach of confrontation and contradiction, in comparison to Unifor's emphasis on common interests and expected outcomes. And, in contrast to the praise coming to Unifor from the top executives of Ford and Stellantis Canada, the top CEOs have been almost hysterical in the attacks on the UAW's strategy for "theatrics," "chaos," and "putting the company's future at risk."

Nothing says more about the differences in approach than GM CEO Mary Barra's recent comments: "Serious bargaining happens at the table, not in public, with two parties who are willing to roll up their sleeves to get a deal done." The over-the-top responses by these CEOs –

compared to the respectful words of the Canadian top executives – tells us all we have to know about the respective approaches and effects of the two unions.

When the UAW decided to move on from the pattern bargaining model, they began a new chapter in auto contract struggles, strategically articulating targeted strikes at each of the companies, and ratcheting them up to increase pressure. Along with this, they held regular rallies and made reports to members that included ongoing organizing campaigns and critical reporting of not only what they were continuing to demand but also what they had won so far. The latter was a no-no for traditional bargaining, which never lets members know how far they might have proceeded in negotiations until the end of bargaining.

The UAW also raised demands – to the auto companies and the federal government – around UAW representation at new joint ventures that the Detroit auto companies were building with non-union battery producers, who were recipients of subsidies from the Biden Administration as part of the huge investment in renewables, driven by subsidies to private corporations. The confrontational approach used to articulate these demands differed considerably from the more collaborative one put forward in the joint press conference held by Unifor with the heads of Stellantis's Canadian subsidiary, emphasizing common interest in winning federal and provincial subsidies for a battery production facility.

The UAW, in spite of US President Biden joining their picket lines, has not endorsed the latter's re-election bid because of the administration's unwillingness to mandate unionization and refuse subsidies in right-to-work states. As well, President Fain has consistently opposed Donald Trump's efforts to woo auto workers, calling him a part of the "billionaire class."

Overall, it isn't difficult to see the different approaches of the UAW and Unifor and the differing sense of confidence, struggle and class identification, and independence that has inspired auto workers, not just in the US but also here in Canada. That sense that we can, and deserve to, undo the concessions, make up for the concessions made – not just during the bankruptcies of 2009 but also since both unions started moving backwards – and that auto workers can inspire the rest of the working class has become part of the spirit of the UAW strike and has Canadian autoworkers looking to the contrast with what is happening here. The result is that Canadian autoworkers want more.

Then there is the question of common strategy. The Unifor and the UAW contracts ended at the same time. While conditions in both countries are not identical, it would have been an excellent opportunity to

jointly work out a set of common strategic approaches and organizational collaboration. Perhaps there were discussions, but it appears that the opportunity to work in solidarity against the auto companies did not happen. (For example, with Ford Windsor producing engines for the hot selling 150 pickup trucks, why wasn't a strike in that facility considered as part of a joint North American strategy?) And, was there a reason for Unifor to settle before the UAW did? Did that help or hinder efforts to make major gains together against the auto companies?

Why the Difference?

There are historical and structural reasons for the different approaches between the two unions and some of the underlying attitudes of workers. The UAW was led for almost 80 years by a clique of entrenched leaders, ruling through an Administration Caucus that in recent decades sought to align worker interests with those of the major auto companies and the Democratic Party leadership. Its leaders became extremely corrupt through a series of collaborative "corporatist" institutions celebrating jointness and common interests with employers, emphasizing the need for competitiveness against offshore producers. That refrain of competitiveness was reflected in a series of concessions and takeaways, supposedly in exchange for job security, beginning in the early 1980s. It resulted in massive losses for workers over the years, through plant closures and layoffs. Needless to say, it led to a sense of resignation ("maybe this is best we can do") or disillusionment with the union by the membership. Over time, the leadership group's personal corruption deepened.

There have been two major opposition movements in the UAW since the 1970s, and the latest one, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), formed around demands to have members directly elect the union's leadership, oppose corruption, and move away from the culture of partnership and concessions. The US federal government's indictment of the former leadership and the obvious weakening of the union provided an opening for this movement, and after a referendum on direct election, they succeeded in electing a slate of insurgent leaders. It is this leadership, along with the participants in the reform movement, who have been driving the UAW's more confrontational and radical turn and are seemingly inspiring and involving much of the membership.

However, contradictions exist. There were very low turnouts in those elections (much of it reflecting the disillusionment with the union), and a number of veterans of the previous administration remained in power in some locals. Despite the very low level of political education

in the UAW (as in many unions), other than electoral and programmatic support for the Democratic Party, many of the reformers have been inspired by critics of the collaborationist direction of the union by politically left inspired activists from the journal *Labor Notes* and by left or socialist political movements such as the Democratic Socialists of America, Solidarity, and others.

In Canada, there are no organized opposition movements from the left in the union movement as a whole and little or no autonomous political or class unionist organization or movement inside Unifor. The current leadership of the union, like most of its predecessors, still relies on the reputation that the union gained in its more radical and independent phase, garnered through the breakaway from the UAW in 1984/5 and the unique and inspiring role played by the Canadian Auto Workers during that period.

The Canadian section of the UAW split away over the latter's adoption of concessions and the ideology of competitiveness reflected in the refusal to allow the Canadians, under the leadership of Bob White, to pursue its own bargaining, ratification, and policy agenda. The Canadians eventually formed the Canadian Auto Workers and embraced an ambitious approach of fighting for gains in the face of the onslaught of neoliberalism, citing the union's independent interests from employers, challenging free trade, and building forms of collective resistance (moving away from pure electoralism and the moderating influence of the NDP), in the face of lean production and competitiveness. As such, it attracted new members and became a magnet for left and democratic trade unionism, in contrast to the UAW, which continued down the garden path.

But over time, free trade and corporate power dramatically increased. The left and socialism were virtually wiped off the larger political map in Canada and the US, and especially within the working class and trade union movement. Early in the new millennium, the CAW began to move in a more traditional direction: accepting concessions and the limitations of free trade and globalization, moderating their resistance. and working with mainstream political parties such as the Liberals, etc.

In spite of the union's turn, leadership continued to portray itself as the heirs of the more radical and independent approach of the past, and as the left within the trade union movement, even though there was little real left or rank and file resistance to the drift towards acceptance of the status quo. In fact, the leadership seemed more interested in lowering worker expectations in bargaining and in response to plant closings (Caterpillar and Oshawa) and making unprincipled deals with employers (such as with Frank Stronach at Magna), resulting in the members' increasing disillusionment.

Although there had been a generous network of membership education in CAW for the rank and file and secondary leadership in locals, much of the drive and power in the union had come from the leadership. When the latter started accepting the neoliberal political and economic environment as something that couldn't be challenged, little pushback of autonomous ferment from the ranks or secondary leadership appeared. Members even lost touch with their own union history.

In the ranks of Unifor today and at its inception – the result of the CAW's merger with CEP – there has been no collective left (or any) autonomous movement for change. The leadership used the merger to trumpet a bogus "new unionism," but the content of their unionism didn't change. Recently, the elected leader of the union was involved in an incident of corruption and was forced to resign, but the overall leadership was not seen as a corrupt mafia-like grouping as in the US.

With the election of Lana Payne as President, in August 2022, a fresh leadership team emerged, working to democratize elements of the union and limit corruption but seemingly bringing little leadership initiative or autonomous push from below for more deep structural changes. So far, no real transformation of the union has taken place.

In the current contract battles, Canadian autoworkers – and many Canadian workers across the spectrum of the working class – have noticed the difference between the two unions, which is clearly reflected in the lukewarm ratification of the Ford Canada agreement with Unifor.

Ford Agreement – Context Matters

The Unifor-Ford Agreement was in a number of ways a step forward but contained several limitations as well.

It featured a relatively rich wage increase with a signing bonus, in comparison to previous contracts. Interpretations vary, but this certainly was the main feature of the agreement. It also reintroduced COLA with limits and reduced the time for the second-tier of workers to gain full rights to 4, instead of 8 years (although this had been won by the UAW before the Ford settlement in Canada).

There were very modest improvements in pensions, as well, but little for existing retirees. A new pension plan, packaged as a Defined Benefit plan, was also bargained.

Few references were made to working conditions or time off. Clearly, the move to electric car production will require different forms of work organization, but no reference is made to union efforts to shape and limit speedup and work intensity in that new model. (For a fuller

description of the Ford Agreement, see autotalks.uniforautohub.ca and Unifor-Ford Master Report.)

The agreement is certainly a positive one, but given the context, it was greeted with a mixed response. After years of concessions and refusing to address inequalities of the tier system, many workers expected a lot more. Given the comparison with the UAW campaign, many were ambivalent or opposed the agreement. Workers at Ford's Oakville assembly plant, Local 707, in 2016, raised a serious and sustained critique of the entrenched tiering system and voted to reject it. They were overridden by votes at other Ford locations. However, that kind of resentment remained a part of the local's culture. It is positive that such resentment ended up translating into critical votes and a desire for a different approach, rather than mass disillusionment and cynicism towards the union.

As well, the skilled trades at Ford locals were said to have voted against the agreement, and the current Unifor leadership refused to recognize the right of the trades to a separate ratification procedure, which had been part of CAW practice since 1988. Stoking the enmity of skilled trades workers doesn't augur well for settlements at GM and particularly, Stellantis.

As already noted, little time was provided for the members to consider the agreement (as usual, presented to them at the last minute, in a PR kind of format), and the ratification votes were held on-line.

One wonders how such a disconnect can exist between bargainers and leadership, on one hand, and the workers in the workplaces, on the other. If the process had been different, recognizing the need to transform the bargaining process in the current context – with higher worker expectations and demands, and the UAW campaign standing in contrast on social media and tv and radio – the result might have been different. Instead, a steady stream of criticism and dissatisfaction emerged from rank-and-file members on social media that was obvious for anyone to see.

Current retirees were disgusted with the obviously trivial gains made in bargaining for pensioners. (One can argue that pensions need to become a political issue, tied to reducing dependence on the private welfare state that has been bargaining directly with employers, and increasingly replaced by an enriched Canada Pension Plan.)

Why didn't the leadership and bargainers take heed of this, and consult with the members, mobilize, and inspire them, instead of providing them with a take-it or leave-it set of ambivalent gains, in a context where workers were looking for a transformative result? If the leadership had prepared the membership for a strike and let it be known to the company that they had clear goals and were prepared to strike over them, things might have turned out differently. Given the way the entire process unfolded, it seems as if the goal was a settlement that could prevent a bigger struggle and also maintain ongoing relationships with Ford and the other companies. It seemed that one of the aims of the leadership was avoiding a strike at all costs rather than building a base of confidence and struggle amongst the membership by winning key breakthroughs.

An unintended consequence of all of this is a feeling amongst a number of autoworkers that somehow, the UAW represents the kind of union they want to be a part of, leading to their questioning the continued separation of the two unions. This is extremely problematic and reflects the lack of education amongst the membership of Unifor, especially about the history of the CAW and its birth and development in the struggle against concessions, neoliberalism, the ideology of competitiveness, and basic democratic union rights.

Even more, it is essential for workers to know and understand the critical lessons about the importance of workers in Canada having their own unions, the need to address the political realities of this country, and the impossibility of developing a link to the rest of the Canadian working class if we were once again part of a US-based union, however much that union becomes an ally.

Solidarity between the working classes of different countries must be based on equality, which would be impossible if we were once again immersed in an organization with overwhelming numbers and steeped in the traditions and ideology of the US, its government, and dealing with the power and particularities of its ruling class. Clearly, Unifor has fallen down on the necessity of educating and preparing the members to take on class struggle in the spirit of its traditions, in solidarity with, but not subservient to, the brothers and sisters in the US.

With the Ford settlement, the next target was GM Canada, and the same format for bargaining has been applied there. As of the end of Canadian Thanksgiving weekend, GM has refused to accept the pattern demands around pensions and moving temp workers into full-time jobs. Unifor locals in Oshawa, St, Catharines and Woodstock Ontario went on strike. After little more than 12 hours on the picket lines, they reached a tentative agreement and scheduled ratification. At Stellantis, where the skilled trades opposition to the agreement has a strong base, 444 local president Cassidy has questioned the Ford pattern, saying, "There are a lot of very angry members feeling that we fell short with the pattern." Things can get even more interesting.

Bigger Challenges to Both Unions

The current bargaining round, while important for the future of both unions, has to be seen in the context of what is happening in the industry as a whole, and the critical necessity of dealing with the climate crisis.

The transition to EVs will require fewer workers, radically transformed supplier networks, increased non-union market participants, workplace closures, and privately-owned corporate employers, subjected to the requirements of competitive markets. While the UAW has included demands around unionization, access to jobs, the right to strike over plant closure, and while both unions talk about "just transitions," little is included in both sets of demands or around the deeper challenges, such as transforming threatened workplaces, bringing in public ownership, moving away from complete dependence on private individual vehicle transportation (even if it is electrically driven), and making the critical changes to the way we live, move, and produce that would allow for transformation towards a sustainable, green society.

There have been precious few experiments like Green Jobs Oshawa, which would have converted the GM complex into a publicly-owned centre for EV vehicles, to be used in public transport and by governments to move people and goods. It could have become a centre for experimenting with green forms of transportation and other uses, not subject to private market competition. That proposal by a group of workers, retirees, and academics was flat out rejected by the union, and Oshawa became a producer of overflow pickup trucks for GM, driven by internal combustion engines.

Renewed militancy and arguing that the working class should unite against the larger multinational corporations is essential. But unions like Unifor and UAW must go beyond militancy, building on it. They need to argue for bold transformations, challenging the auto companies not just for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. These unions can become spaces to provide education for their members about their histories, economic realities, and the climate crisis, and help members get a sense of what unions can do to help deal with it all.

This can't happen at the bargaining table but rather requires political approaches and movements that go beyond reliance on the Democrats in the US, or the NDP or Liberals in Canada. Larger, more radical, and powerful social movements are needed that combine the fight against climate change and the fossil fuel economy with a socialist perspective, challenging governments to limit, and ultimately, end our dependence on private competitive employers, and in the process, fighting for changes to the role of governments and the state. Just Transition needs to mean transforming the sector and the economy as a whole, and providing new kinds of jobs in a more planned economic environment.

As a start, we need socialists to work in and around unions and build a base in spaces like the auto sector. Even the modest but exciting transformations taking place in the UAW (and indeed, the birth of the UAW in the 1930s), and those that helped to drive the birth and growth of the CAW, took place in a context where socialists or socialist-inspired movements played a role in the auto industry and in the union. •

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