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The CAW – CEP Merger: A Political Reflection*

Bruce Allen

THE APPROACHING MERGER BETWEEN the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) will create the largest private sector union in Canada with over 300,000 members employed in 22 sectors of the economy. As such, it has the potential to profoundly affect the political direction of both the labour movement in this country and ultimately the political future of Canada.

Accordingly, these things pose the immediate and unanswered question of what the political direction of the new union will be. This in turn brings into focus the deafening silence within the CAW concerning this question and precisely how it will be answered.

The only thing that is known for certain is that the question will be addressed by the delegates to the founding convention of the new union, expected to take place next summer. That said, there are a number of related and as yet unanswered questions. Will the delegates be presented with a political policy paper formulated in advance by staff representatives which sets out the political direction of the new mega union and then be expected to rubber stamp it? We just do not know. Or will there be a genuinely democratic and wide open debate where different political positions will be presented and chosen from? Again we just do not know and quite reprehensibly no one is giving the membership of both organizations any clue.

From a historical perspective, both the silence surrounding the question of the political direction of the new union and the lack of forthright explanation of how it will be answered should really come as no surprise. The silence must be viewed as symptomatic of the lack of democracy intrinsic to the CAW at national level in particular and to the fact that the question of the new union's political direction is very awkward for both unions within the context of the

*The ideas expressed in this article are those of Bruce Allen as an individual, and are not necessarily associated with constituencies he represents in a variety of trade union circles.

upcoming merger. This is the case precisely because the current political directions of the CAW and the CEP are irreconcilably at odds, especially with respect to the New Democratic Party (NDP). Indeed, the particular approaches to the NDP evident in these two unions are like oil and water. One position will prevail and the other is going to be discarded, meaning that the political legacy of the union whose political direction does not prevail will disappear into an Orwellian-like memory hole.

History again makes all of this abundantly clear and predictable. For the past two decades the CEP has been formally affiliated to the NDP. Consistent with this, the CEP has actively participated in the life of the NDP including in its most recent contest to elect a federal leader. It supported the unsuccessful leadership bid of Brian Topp, revealing that it has no inclination to shift the political direction of the NDP to the left.

The CEP's loyalty to the NDP and its leadership has in fact been unequivocal over the years, regardless of the policies of the NDP leadership. This was most vividly on display in Ontario in the mid-1990s. Back then the CEP was one of the "Pink Paper" unions in the Ontario Federation of Labour which objectively sided with Ontario NDP Premier Bob Rae's government during the fight against its anti-union Social Contract.

In stark contrast to the CEP, the CAW has been anything but politically consistent with respect to its relationship to the NDP. At the time of the fight against the Rae government's Social Contract, waged principally by Ontario's public sector unions, the CAW commendably positioned itself clearly to the left of the Ontario NDP by strongly supporting the public sector unions. But that positioning to the left of the NDP proved to be relatively short lived. As the 1990s drew to a close, the CAW made a sharp turn to the right by embracing strategic voting and warming up to the Liberal Party, and subsequently to Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty in particular. This orientation towards the Liberals (particularly but not exclusively in Ontario) has continued to this day, effectively making a mockery of past CAW criticism of the NDP from the left. Indeed, CAW National President Ken Lewenza has gone so far as to openly campaign with McGuinty in the last provincial election. Lewenza recently responded to McGuinty's decision to step down as premier and Ontario Liberal leader by lauding McGuinty's government as one which ostensibly improved the lives of many Ontarians. Such praise came in the immediate wake of the McGuinty government's launch of a brutal assault on public sector unions and the implementation of austerity measures clearly worse than those pursued by the Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae. It is also noteworthy that in the course of this evolution of the CAW's politics the union's formal affiliation with the NDP was terminated.

But now in the context of the upcoming merger, the CAW appears likely to find itself affiliated with the NDP once again. Indeed developments within the context of the merger point in that direction. The CEP clearly appears to

be fully intent on continuing its affiliation with the NDP, as the appearance of Federal NDP leader, Thomas Mulcair, at its just-concluded convention in Quebec City vividly demonstrated. CEP leaders and activists evidently want no part of the kind of relationship the CAW has had with the Liberals in recent years.

By contrast, no one in the CAW appears to be working to maintain a *de facto* relationship with the Liberal Party, expressed in a policy advocating strategic voting in elections. All of this means that it will be CAW leaders and activists who had adhered to recent CAW political positions who will be the ones depositing their politics in a memory hole, strongly encouraged to become born-again NDP supporters, if not members.

These things, in turn, pose additional unanswered questions. If the new union does affiliate with the NDP, the next question becomes one of the nature of its relationship with the NDP. Will the new union continue the political legacy of the CEP, which amounts to all-but-unconditional support of the NDP leadership and its policies, a politics guaranteed to make little if any effort to compel the NDP to turn to the left. Significantly, if it does follow this course, will the new union continue the legacy of the CAW within the NDP, prior to the crisis in their relationship prompted by the Social Contract and subsequent developments. That legacy accepted the direction set out by the NDP leadership. This pre-Social Contract CAW orientation made little if any effort to push the NDP to the left. It even assisted the NDP leadership in marginalizing those who would have charted a left turn for the NDP.

These things pose real challenges for the few people truly on the left within both the CAW and the CEP. Faced with the growing prospect of a new mega-union affiliated to the NDP that is supportive of its current leadership and political direction, it is imperative not to block affiliation with the NDP, which will necessarily have some positive consequences. NDP affiliation, for instance, will mean burying the CAW's embrace of the Liberal Party. As a consequence, strategic voting for the Liberals would end. The sorry spectacles of CAW national presidents heaping praise on the likes of Dalton McGuinty and Paul Martin, to standing ovations at meetings of the national union, would not be repeated. There would be much less holding back on criticism of the policies of Liberal governments and greater inclination to support struggles against those policies. In other words affiliation with the NDP at the expense of the Liberals would be conducive to a noticeable, albeit very limited, turn to the left.

But it will also be imperative to simultaneously do two other quite different things. One is to initiate a no-holds-barred assessment of and debate about the current and future political engagement by the new union. The other will be to wage a political struggle within the new union. This would challenge any perpetuation of the CEP's unwavering support of the NDP establishment and the inevitable efforts of the leadership of both unions to suppress agitation aimed

at getting the new union to make a decisive political turn to the left. Only this kind of truly left turn can mobilize workers in a meaningful embrace of the struggle against capitalist austerity and for the fundamental transformation of society.