

# SHIFTING GEARS

*Canadian Autoworkers and the Changing  
Landscape of Labour Politics*

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CHAPTER 1

SHIFTING GEARS

*An Introduction*

On November 2, 2021, union members from across the province gathered virtually for the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) convention to pledge support for the New Democratic Party (NDP) in the upcoming provincial election.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in Milton, Progressive Conservative (PC) premier Doug Ford, flanked by Unifor president Jerry Dias and Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) president Smokey Thomas, was holding a press conference with members of Unifor Local 414 to announce a surprise boost to the minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> The pre-election announcement, which came three years after Ford scrapped the previous government's scheduled minimum-wage increase, immediately shifted the media spotlight away from the OFL convention. The fact that Ford was standing alongside two of the province's most well-known labour leaders made for headline news and left many labour activists scratching their heads. "Some people were raising eyebrows, and some people were raising bricks," according to Unifor retiree Tony Leah.<sup>3</sup> After all, both Unifor and OPSEU had campaigned hard against Ford in the 2018 provincial election and were historically harsh critics of the PCs. The idea that the leader of either union would stand alongside a PC premier at a press conference seemed anathema to the political aims and objectives of the labour movement. Dias, however, brushed off criticism from union activists. "I don't give a rat's a--," he told the *Toronto Star*.<sup>4</sup>

Dias's decision to stand alongside a Conservative premier as part of a pre-election news announcement demonstrated just how dramatically the

landscape of labour and working-class politics in Canada had shifted. Since its founding in 2013, Unifor had been closely associated with anti-Conservative strategic voting, a tactic inherited from its primary predecessor union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). A decade earlier, the CAW had shifted gears in terms of political strategy, leaving behind a partisan alliance with the NDP in favour of political independence that routinely manifested itself in strategic-voting campaigns, primarily to the benefit of Liberals both in Ontario and in federal politics.

This move away from the party-union alliance was a significant departure for the CAW. Not only had its predecessor union, the Canadian section of the United Auto Workers (UAW), helped to officially launch the social democratic NDP in 1961, but both the UAW and the CAW had also sustained the party through campaign donations and volunteer resources for nearly four decades. The partisan alliance was a key feature of the CAW's identity, as evidenced by the attention that it received at the union's founding convention in 1985. Initially named the UAW Canada, the new union declared that it had "long recognized that gains made at the bargaining table need to be backed up with laws to protect workers. For this reason, the UAW Canada is a strong supporter of the New Democratic Party at the municipal, provincial and federal levels."<sup>5</sup> NDP leader Ed Broadbent was the only political dignitary invited to address the September 1985 convention. Flanked by CAW founding president Bob White, Broadbent used the opportunity to attack the record of Brian Mulroney's PC government and trumpeted the union's record of achievement at the bargaining table. The NDP leader also praised the union for advancing the cause of working-class people generally and for its leadership in the fight against apartheid in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Broadbent's comments underscored the fact that the union's politics had always been broader than the party-union relationship, a dynamic that remains true today.

What has changed is the union's political strategy. From the 1960s into the 1990s, the union saw politics as class-based, which led it to forge a partisan relationship with the NDP and to actively participate in broader social justice struggles. Although the union's philosophical commitment to social unionism remains intact, its political strategies have shifted significantly. In the face of a crisis in social democratic electoralism in the 1990s and amid the rise of neoliberal politics, the union pivoted to place

a heavier emphasis on syndicalist-inspired direct action as an alternative to the traditional NDP-union relationship. This strategic repositioning, however, soon gave way to the pursuit of anti-Conservative strategic voting and tactical alliances with Liberal politicians as the political-economic context shifted around the turn of the twenty-first century. In the face of an unprecedented attack on union rights and freedoms and significant industrial job loss and de-unionization, a defensive and transactional labour politics rooted in sectionalism became more prominent in the politics of the union.

Sectionalism refers to the tendency of unions to limit their aims and objectives for the benefit of their dues-paying members, often to the exclusion of other groups of workers or the public more broadly.<sup>7</sup> Although all unions experience sectionalist pressures, how these pressures manifest themselves in the frames, repertoires, and internal organizational practices of labour organizations is dependent on both the choices of union leaders and the political-economic context in which they find themselves.<sup>8</sup> This book explains the *how* and *why* behind CAW/Unifor's political shifts and explores the implications for the labour movement and for Canadian politics more generally.

For much of the postwar period, the United Auto Workers' Canadian section found itself at the forefront of labour movement struggles in the workplace, on the streets, and at the ballot box. At the level of the workplace, the autoworkers struck to establish key labour rights like mandatory union recognition and union security (such as the Rand Formula, which settled the famous 1945 Windsor Ford strike), and they moved the yard stick for unions and the broader working class on a host of issues, including shift premiums, cost-of-living allowances, and better vacation entitlements. The union engaged politically by mobilizing its members to vote for social democratic political parties and to rally in the streets in response to policy changes. In this way, autoworkers played a key role in the fight for the welfare state, labour protections, the social wage, and redistributive public policies for all working-class people. In short, the union not only enjoyed a reputation for bargaining strong collective agreements for workers but also had political clout that extended beyond its own membership.

The union was catapulted into the media spotlight when the Canadian section broke away from the UAW to form the CAW in 1985. Building on

the legacy of Canadian pulp and paper workers who broke away from their respective US-based international unions to form the Pulp, Paper and Woodworkers of Canada in 1963 and the Canadian Paperworkers Union in 1974, the CAW's dramatic breakaway from a powerful international union reinforced a growing trend toward Canadianization of the movement.<sup>9</sup> The timing and context of the break, and the sheer size of the CAW, inspired many union activists beyond its ranks to embrace militancy, a class-based discourse, and an explicitly political approach to labour relations.

In the years following its formation, the CAW absorbed dozens of independent unions that shared this vision of a militant and independent Canadian unionism and impressively grew the union through a combination of new organizing drives and raiding – that is, the attempt by one union to induce members of another to defect and become members of the raiding union. The CAW steadily diversified its membership beyond the automotive sector, a process that was further accelerated with the merger of the CAW and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) to create Unifor in August 2013.

The creation of Unifor rendered the union less Ontario-centric and less male-dominated than it had been when the CAW was founded. In 1987, 80 percent of the CAW's 143,000 members were based in Ontario, and the union's ten largest locals were all located in Ontario. By 2005, 64 percent of its 265,000 members were Ontario-based, and Local 114 in British Columbia was the only CAW local to break into the top ten.<sup>10</sup> Unifor is now the largest private-sector union in Canada and represents workers in over two dozen sectors of the Canadian economy. However, a majority of Unifor's members still live and work in Ontario. As of 2022, 58 percent of the union's 315,000 members were based in Ontario, and 72 percent were men.<sup>11</sup> Thus the history of the union is very much focused on Ontario, particularly southern Ontario. Manufacturing and the automotive and auto parts sectors, although no longer numerically dominant, continue to have outsized influence on the union as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

Although the CAW ceased to exist formally when it merged with the CEP, only its name has disappeared. Key CAW personalities, structures, practices, and cultures persist at Unifor, thus contributing to the sense, albeit contested, that the CEP was more or less absorbed into the CAW's

basic structure and culture with the creation of Unifor. This absorption was perhaps most evident in the realm of political action, where Unifor more or less adopted the CAW's anti-Conservative strategic-voting tactic as a key pillar of its electoral strategy – one that has since evolved into a more sectionalist transactional approach to party-union relationships.

Unifor has unquestionably worked to establish itself as a political powerhouse. Given its size, reach, and institutional focus on political action, the union's approach to politics matters for Canadian politics as a whole. Unifor's politics also matter for the rest of the labour movement. Although it ceased to be affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in 2018, Unifor's influence in central labour organizations has been significant, with numerous leaders elected to the presidencies of the CLC, provincial federations of labour, and local labour councils. This outsized influence, combined with competition for members and political differences, has produced enduring rivalries with other unions like the United Steelworkers, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Unifor's unique status in the Canadian labour movement and its shifting political strategies are changing the landscape of labour politics.

## STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN LABOUR POLITICS

Why do unions pursue certain political strategies over others? What accounts for changes in union political strategy? The answers lie at the intersection of structure and agency. Structural frameworks for understanding labour politics focus on broad political and economic factors to explain how political choices and opportunities are shaped.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, for those who focus on agency, the strategic preferences and choices of individual leaders are the key explanatory variable. This approach is premised on the belief that union leaders and members are rational, pragmatic, and self-interested.<sup>14</sup> In the context of labour politics, union leaders are regarded as rational utility maximizers seeking to benefit their members through whichever political strategies might yield the most desirable outcomes. The same logic applies to the union-leader-as-sellout critique, which assumes that a union's choices and strategic direction can be radically altered through a simple change in leadership.



Structuralist approaches vary, but they do not altogether discount the importance of individual or collective self-interest. Rather, structuralists understand self-interest to be “embedded in an institutional structure of rules, norms, expectations, and traditions that severely limited the free play of individual will and calculation.”<sup>15</sup> In short, union leaders become organizationally socialized into pursuing particular political strategies and alliances based on historical links, ideological alignments, and a general unity of purpose.<sup>16</sup>

Labour politics does not exist in a vacuum, and labour unions are not static entities. Although unions and their members have agency and real capacity to change the political and economic context, they are simultaneously constrained by it. The relationship is a dialectical one. As a result, unions’ strategies and tactics must constantly be reformulated and reassessed in relation to what is politically possible. However, we also cannot understand political shifts as separate from what is happening in the workplace. Labour market restructuring and broader economic factors like deindustrialization and economic crises have an impact on what unions think is possible and achievable not just in the realm of collective bargaining but also in the political sphere.

The labour studies and industrial relations literature generally frames crises in union density and labour’s declining political power in structural terms, but as social scientists Scott Aquanno and Toba Bryant correctly note, these explanations “are not so much wrong as they are overly simplistic and politically restraining: by ignoring the important role of union strategies and fixating on the laws of motion of capitalism or abstract economic shifts, they discern few of the organized forms of power impacting historical eventuation.”<sup>17</sup> In the words of sociologist Pamela Sugiman, “Structure moulds and constrains, but it does not prohibit agency, in either thought or action.”<sup>18</sup> In short, political-economic structure is a necessary but insufficient explanation for the choices that unions make about economic and political strategy.

## LABOUR POLITICS IN CANADA

To contextualize the growth and development of the union’s politics, it is necessary to consider this evolution in relation to the political history of the broader labour movement. Political action has always been part of unions’ arsenal in Canada, and debates concerning unions’ approach to

politics date back to at least the 1870s. Since that time, union leaders have advanced a wide variety of political strategies, including partyism, labourism, syndicalism, socialism, communism, and social democracy.<sup>19</sup> Political scientist Martin Robin's historical analysis of competing forms of labour politics in Canada has revealed a pattern that shows that Canada's union movement alternated between conventional electoral strategies and syndicalist direct action between 1880 and 1930.<sup>20</sup> Although there was a strong tradition of independent labour political action in Canada, Gompersism steered craft unions' approaches to electoral politics for much of the early twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Named after founding American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers and often referred to as business unionism, this approach is more narrowly concerned with securing the best possible economic deal for union members. Even if Gompers conceded that capitalists and workers did have some conflicting interests, he was well known for his political pragmatism, rejecting outright any suggestion that the capitalist system needed to be replaced or that workers needed a socialist party to promote their political and economic interests.<sup>22</sup> In the realm of electoral politics, Gompers argued that labour could strengthen its economic clout in the workplace by employing a strategy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies.<sup>23</sup> Generally, a business-unionist (or Gompersist) political strategy is geared toward protecting the interests of a specific group of union members rather than toward issues of wealth redistribution or justice with broader implications for the working class as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

The most widely embraced alternative to Gompersist labour politics in the early to mid-twentieth century was social democracy. Although social democratic thought and action took various competing and complementary forms, its most prominent electoral expression in Canada was undoubtedly the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Created in the midst of the Great Depression by socialists, farmers, labour organizations, and social reformers to challenge the capitalist economic orthodoxy of the Liberals and Conservatives, the CCF competed with the Communist Party to carry the mantle of working-class politics and managed to secure significant support from industrial unions, including the United Auto Workers.<sup>25</sup> In its first decade, the CCF managed to make inroads in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, both federally and provincially, and would eventually emerge as the dominant electoral force on the left.

Union affiliation to the CCF peaked in 1944, with roughly 100 unions and 50,000 union members formally linked to the party.<sup>26</sup> However, these numbers were disappointing given the explosive growth in union membership and the effort put into recruitment strategies during the war. Decades of debate and division between unions about labour's political strategy impeded the CCF's ability to win over the broader labour movement as a formal partner. The labour movement was torn apart by internal political divisions, with communist, socialist, and Gomerist elements pulling unions in different directions and making a cohesive approach to politics impossible. In the case of the UAW in Canada, both CCFers and Communists had significant influence and bitterly battled for control of locals and elected offices.<sup>27</sup> Both of these parties were largely shunned by the much larger Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), which preferred a non-partisan Gomerist approach to electoral politics in line with that of the American Federation of Labor. By 1952, union affiliation to the CCF had shrunk to just 15,000 union members, and labour movement efforts to build the CCF lost steam amid internal divisions and external threats.<sup>28</sup> Industrial relations scholar Richard Ulric Miller argues that "whether because of American influence and control, communist opposition, and alleged predilection of TLC leadership for the Liberals or further disillusionment with political action engendered by consistent electoral failures, the CCF did not become labour's parliamentary arm."<sup>29</sup>

The debate over whether labour needed its *own* party would not be resolved until the TLC merged with the Canadian Congress of Labour to form the Canadian Labour Congress in 1956. One of the CLC's first priorities was to throw a lifeline to the faltering CCF. After decades of disappointing results in federal elections, the party had been handed a near death blow in the 1958 federal election, capturing just 9.5 percent of the popular vote and holding onto just eight seats in the House of Commons.<sup>30</sup> Changes in the ideological composition of the labour leadership, strained relations between the Liberals and key labour leaders, and the ascendancy of social democratic union leadership more broadly helped to create the conditions that allowed most unions to overcome their aversion to partisan politics and to support the establishment of a "New Party" out of the ashes of the CCF.<sup>31</sup> The CLC's successful resolution called for the establishment of "a broadly based people's political movement, which embraces the CCF, the

Labour movement, farm organizations, professional people, and other liberally minded persons interested in basic social reform.”<sup>32</sup>

The most significant formal partisan attachment between organized labour and a political party in Canada was thus achieved in 1961 with the creation of the New Democratic Party. Canada’s NDP was launched much later than similar parties in the United Kingdom, Australia, and across Europe. However, unlike the creation of these socialist-inspired labour parties, the emergence of the NDP did not fundamentally realign Canada’s federal party system. In fact, the NDP has never formed a federal government and only briefly rose to the status of Official Opposition in 2011 before reverting to its traditional position as third or fourth party in 2015. The party has proven more successful at the provincial level, having formed governments in six provinces. This provincial success is relevant insofar as most labour and employment law in Canada falls under provincial jurisdiction.

The initial response from affiliates to the CLC’s call for the creation of a New Party was promising. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a labour movement consensus emerged around the need to create a social democratic party that could act as a vehicle to advance unions’ political interests. Every provincial Federation of Labour, except for that of Prince Edward Island, was officially on board. Nearly every industrial union, including the UAW, signalled support.<sup>33</sup>

Much has been written about the labour movement’s relationship with the NDP in both federal and provincial politics. Contemporary academic debates have largely centred on the extent to which NDP provincial governments actually represent workers’ interests.<sup>34</sup> Union experiments with strategic voting and the tactic’s perceived negative impact on the NDP have also attracted scholarly attention.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, party and union activists, as well as researchers, have long debated whether the union link helps or hinders the NDP’s electoral fortunes.<sup>36</sup> Some of these debates have been framed in normative terms. However, the ideological implications of strengthening or loosening labour ties to the NDP are complicated and uneven, in part because labour has had both left-wing and right-wing influences on the party, depending on the era, the issue, and the individual unions involved.<sup>37</sup>

Political scientists Matthew Polacko, Simon Kiss, and Peter Graefe contend that although union and working-class voters are historically more

likely to support the NDP than their nonunion or managerial-class counterparts, “the fact that the NDP has rarely won more than one in four working-class votes speaks to its limited ability to carve out a distinct class electorate in a country dominated by linguistic and regional divisions.”<sup>38</sup> Whether responsibility for the federal NDP’s less-than-stellar electoral record rests primarily with organized labour, party strategists, or the relative weakness of class voting in Canada has been hotly contested.<sup>39</sup>

Union member affiliation to the NDP reached its peak of just 14.6 percent in 1963, only two years after the party’s launch.<sup>40</sup> Outside of major industrial unions like those in the auto and steel sectors, affiliation rates remained weak, and the individual locals of affiliated unions often resisted calls from leaders to line up behind the party in any official capacity. The party’s initial lack of electoral success contributed to the idea that there was not much to be achieved through partisan affiliation, but leaders of industrial unions remained quite committed to the NDP. Although the NDP failed to achieve much traction at the federal level, its leverage in minority parliaments between 1962 and 1968 amplified its importance, and its relative success in provincial politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s gave the union movement a reason to preserve its stake in the party.<sup>41</sup>

The federal Liberal government’s imposition of wage and price controls in 1975, after having campaigned against them in 1974, colossally damaged any goodwill that remained between the Liberals and the labour movement.<sup>42</sup> This policy reversal drew unions closer to the federal NDP – a staunch opponent of wage controls – and helped to increase the NDP’s seat count and share of the vote in the 1979 and 1980 elections. Although the NDP remained a minor party, the labour movement could justify its continued support by pointing to its positive electoral trajectory, its important role as a successful broker in minority parliaments, and its reliability as an ally on the public-policy front.

Despite the central role played by the UAW in launching the NDP and despite the CAW’s strong support of the party for much of its history, the politics of the union cannot be reduced to that of a partisan relationship with the NDP. For the union, the party-union relationship was just one expression of its politics, and the union never completely surrendered its own political perspectives or priorities to the party. Writing in 1998, sociologist James Rinehart argued,

The social unionism of the CAW is manifested through building women's shelters, health clinics, child care facilities, and co-op housing; spearheading anti-FTA and anti-NAFTA coalitions; organizing a series of citywide work stoppages and mass demonstrations to protest the policies of the current Progressive Conservative government in Ontario; forging ties with South African, Mexican, and South and Central American labor movements; establishing a social justice fund to support progressive international projects; and broadening the scope of collective bargaining to incorporate demands that benefit the community (e.g., demands for reduced work time to create job openings).<sup>43</sup>

It is also important to note that, despite a sordid legacy of racism and sexism within its ranks, the leaders and activists of the UAW and the CAW also organized and took part in demonstrations, lobbying, boycotts, and community-union alliances in support of a range of progressive social and economic issues.<sup>44</sup> Coalition work in support of migrant farm workers, gender equity, anti-racism, and queer and reproductive rights all provide rich examples of how the union's notion of politics extended far beyond the confines of parties and elections.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, coalition building became more prominent in the CAW as relations between the union and the party became increasingly strained. The above highlights a central problem in categorizing union approaches to political action.

Debates about the labour movement's proper political direction often cast business unionism and social unionism as mutually exclusive union strategies, with social unionism – understood as engagement with social justice struggles beyond the workplace – generally considered the route most closely associated with social democratic electoralism. However, the counterposition of business unionism and social unionism is often based on simplistic understandings of these ideal types. In particular, strategies and tactics are often mistaken for a philosophical approach to unionism.<sup>46</sup> The reality is more complex. Because labour politics and strategic action are worked out in the course of contingent historical struggles both within unions and in relation to employers, governments, and political parties, the concrete patterns of unions' political claims and practices mix these two modes of action. Thus understanding the implications of union

practices requires some careful and nuanced analysis. Unions are, in fact, complicated hybrids, often advancing collective action frames, repertoires, and internal organizational practices that do not conform to ideal types.<sup>47</sup> CAW/Unifor is no exception.

The union's shift in terms of partisan alliances is often misunderstood as a break with social unionism. Its enduring commitment to social justice projects in Canada and abroad, its public pronouncements on issues of human rights and income inequality, and its regular calls to protect and expand universal social programs that benefit all working-class people suggest a more complicated reality. A partisan alliance with the NDP is not a precondition for social unionism, nor is independent political action is not synonymous with Gomerism. However, there is still evidence that CAW/Unifor's politics have shifted over time in ways that have brought the union closer to the frames and repertoires traditionally associated with business unionism. Strategic political alliances with employers and with non-social-democratic parties are but two expressions of this shift. Meanwhile, repertoires traditionally associated with social unionism have gradually faded into the background, even though the union continues to frame and understand its own politics in social unionist terms. In short, CAW/Unifor represents a complex synthesis of business unionism and social unionism in the Canadian labour movement.

### SHIFTING ELECTORAL STRATEGIES

A range of theoretical approaches has been applied to the study of relationships between organized labour and social democratic parties. The scholarly literature yields four theoretical strands. The first focuses on how macro-economic shifts influence and alter union-party relations. Political scientist James Piazza, for example, argues that social democratic parties have jettisoned their ties to organized labour because increased global capital mobility has hollowed out the membership of industrial unions and severely diluted the importance of organized labour as an electoral base.<sup>48</sup> Piazza's argument, however, is overly deterministic because it treats globalization as an exogenous threat that directs the actions of parties and governments rather than as a political project and terrain of struggle where parties and governments play active roles in both authoring and responding to

globalizing pressures.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, a considerable body of research empirically demonstrates that the impact of globalization is not uniform and that the responses of social democratic parties have varied.<sup>50</sup>

The second strand of the literature is rooted in transactional politics, where unions and social democratic parties operate with a view to maximizing utility.<sup>51</sup> This rational-choice approach treats unions and social democratic parties as rational actors engaged in a mutually beneficial exchange. Unions are expected to use their resources and to mobilize their members to elect social democratic politicians, and in exchange, social democratic governments are expected to deliver on labour's public-policy priorities. Although there is no question that all labour politics is transactional to some extent, a utility-maximization framework wrongly downplays and even ignores ideology and personal ties as important motivating factors in relationships between labour leaders and social democratic politicians. Given that the relationship between organized labour and the NDP in Canada endured even when the party seemed far from the halls of power, the explanatory value of the rational-choice approach has rightly been questioned.

A third strand of the scholarly literature offers “ideological affinity” as the glue that holds together union-party relationships.<sup>52</sup> In their study of NDP-union relations, political scientists Harold Jansen and Lisa Young argue that, despite the adoption of campaign finance reforms banning union donations to federal political parties in the mid-2000s, the party and the labour movement maintained their links based on a joint ideological commitment to social democracy. In the words of Jansen and Young, “Labour unions support social democratic political parties not in the hope of improving the fate of unions or their workers but rather as a way of furthering the objectives of social democracy – objectives to which trade unionist leaders are generally personally committed.”<sup>53</sup>

Jansen and Young's framework has not gone uncontested. In collaboration with political scientist Dennis Pilon, we have challenged many of the assumptions associated with the ideological-affinity approach, including the idea that unions and social democratic parties lack any sort of material basis for their links. Instead, we offer up a critical political economy lens to better understand both stability and change in union-party relationships. Focused on the dialectical interplay between institutional structures and



social dynamics over time, we and Pilon argue that a critical political economy approach that is “non-determinist and historicized” is best equipped to reveal “the complexities, variations and evolving tensions” in the party-union relationship.<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that the theoretical frameworks for understanding party-union relationships are not watertight compartments. For example, political scientist Katrina Burgess has combined insights from various theories of union-party relations to explain why unions in different national contexts confront “loyalty dilemmas” differently in their dealings with social democratic governing parties.<sup>55</sup> Specifically, although Burgess recognizes the importance of utility maximization as the central goal of party-union relationships, she relies on structural factors to contextualize her case studies and draws on ideological affinities to demonstrate how party-union relationships are heavily mediated and coloured by a range of factors, including historical legacies. Larry Savage and labour scholar and union activist Chantal Mancini rely on a similar integrated theoretical framework to explain both convergence and divergence in Ontario teacher union electoral strategy between 1999 and 2018.<sup>56</sup>

In the Canadian context, similar integrated insights reveal that labour’s enduring ties to the NDP eventually weakened amid a crisis in social democratic electoralism. Strategic disagreements over how the party handled the free trade issue in the 1988 federal election exposed fissures in the union-NDP partnership, which was further strained by the Ontario NDP government’s policy reversals in the early 1990s. Specifically, the Ontario NDP’s anti-union Social Contract Act in 1993 precipitated a rupture that disoriented the labour movement and opened possibilities for alternative political outlets.

Owing to the twin external pressures of neoliberal globalization and the need to preserve jobs and investments in an increasingly anti-labour climate, the CAW’s relationship with the NDP was further marginalized. Given the party’s lack of influence at Queen’s Park and in Ottawa, it could do little in practice to help the union weather the storm. And given the party’s moderating tendencies, left-wing elements inside the union saw an opportunity to move beyond the party by embracing a more radical and independent political approach. On the one hand, the union found itself at the forefront of radical protest movements, as evidenced by its strong

support for the Days of Action demonstrations in Ontario and for anti-globalization mobilizations in cities like Windsor and Quebec City. Counterintuitively, the union's electoral interventions during this period were leading to stronger links with Liberal politicians, largely at the expense of the NDP. Vacillation between competing and arguably contradictory political strategies in the late 1990s and early 2000s gave the impression that the union lacked a coherent approach to political action. Moreover, the NDP's natural tendency to put its own electoral ambitions ahead of the labour movement's public-policy agenda in minority-government situations beginning in 2004 further strained the party-union relationship.

The union's eventual turn away from the NDP as its primary political vehicle can be understood only within the broader political-economic context, where neoliberal policies threatened the union's organizational stability and its capacity to defend its interests. Having been shut out as a stakeholder by anti-labour governments, the union felt forced into a defensive position that required it to make some difficult decisions about how to weather the neoliberal storm. Although there were internal struggles over the union's political direction, these dynamics eventually resulted in a shift toward a more independent and transactional brand of political engagement that has now come to define Unifor's approach to parties and elections.

Thus the reorientation of party-union relations has shifted the landscape of labour politics in Canada but not in the direction of a more socialist or left-wing brand of working-class politics, contrary to what many in the union had intended. Rather, there has been a clear emergence of Gompertist strategies as the main alternative to traditional partisan links to the NDP in the realm of electoral politics.

These shifts in CAW/Unifor labour politics can be explained only by integrating insights from the various theoretical strands outlined above. Although ideology figures prominently, the parties in office, public opinion, and unions' own capacity to secure wins or to fend off losses all play a role in shaping political strategy. When the political-economic environment became more restrictive after 9/11, leaders used the union's centralized structure to manage expectations rather than to whip up discontent. External economic pressures were increasingly internalized by the union's leadership to justify shifting gears politically.

## INTERNAL UNION DYNAMICS

Although the aforementioned political dynamics are strongly influenced by external pressures like deindustrialization, globalization, and financial crises, they are also internally driven by actors who see ad hoc alliances with employers and governments as key to weathering the negative effects of these external pressures. Internal dynamics unquestionably play a significant role in the formulation of unions' political strategies. As labour studies scholar Charlotte Yates reminds us, "collective identities and internal organizational structures shape how unions intervene in political debates and conflicts and are therefore critical in fully understanding the strategic choices made by unions."<sup>57</sup> Internal union dynamics – including the organization and distribution of power between leaders, staff, and members; political culture and collective identities; and the mechanisms of discussion, decision making, and political education and socialization – are central to understanding how political orientations are both reproduced and transformed.

In the case of the CAW, the union actively reproduced a culture of struggle that was rooted in its syndicalist politics and tactics, its toleration of dissent from the left, particularly at the Canadian Council, its internal educational program, and its recruitment of left activists to staff roles. Since the early 2000s, this culture has given way to defensiveness, as the union has pursued controversial cross-class alliances with both employers and non-social-democratic political parties.

A long-standing and underappreciated characteristic of the CAW's internal political structure was in fact its centralization. Although the CAW had a National Executive Board (NEB) made up of elected rank-and-file leaders, these leaders were mostly hand-picked by the president's office, and their elections were secured through a very disciplined caucus system, namely the Administration caucus descended from the days of UAW president Walter Reuther. Of note, UAW and CAW national leadership elections were formally conducted at delegated conventions rather than by a one-member–one-vote system. In the words of labour studies scholar David Camfield, "the Administration Caucus functions somewhat like a political party in a one-party system. Delegates and staff who attend one of its meetings are expected to support its decisions during debates on the convention floor."<sup>58</sup>

However, the union's position as a Canadian section in a US-based union created an incentive to allow for political ferment that denoted the Canadians' political independence and provided the leadership with a counterweight to pressures from the UAW's international headquarters in Detroit. The formation of the CAW in 1985 shifted the centralized power of the Canadian director into the office of the national president, and the left-nationalist dynamic that fuelled dissent at the Canadian Council was removed. As a result, decisions about political direction became increasingly top-down, as there were fewer counterweights from the membership. This concentration of power also meant that interpersonal relationships between leaders and key political figures took on greater importance. The CAW's culture and structure have largely persisted at Unifor. When the CAW merged with the CEP, the union retained the centralization of power in the president's office and in the Administration caucus (reformed as the Unity caucus after 2013), along with the command-and-control culture that flows from this centralization of power.

The president's assistants play a central role both in the day-to-day affairs of the union and in its broader strategic direction. Not only do staff carry the political message and authority of the leadership, but they also actively participate in the caucus system that reproduces this leadership. Although staff do not have the right to vote at Unifor councils or conventions, they do have the right to speak, often doing so in support of the leadership's priorities. The president's material ability to distribute rewards also helps to consolidate power. Staff positions at Unifor are highly coveted, and many of those recruited onto staff come directly from the ranks of the NEB. This situation creates a dynamic where members of the NEB risk losing out on staff positions if they find themselves offside with the national president, who has the exclusive authority to appoint staff. Thus, with the leadership having decided that a shift in political strategy was needed, there was little to prevent its implementation, despite the formal role played by the Canadian Council – often referred to as the union's parliament – in rubber-stamping the decision. In short, the centralization of power in the president's office and the increasingly marginal role played by the Canadian Council allowed the union to shift gears with little internal dissent.

It is worth noting that even if progressive reformers within the union have criticized the caucus system and the level of centralization in the

president's office as undemocratic, the relationship between centralization, the caucus system, progressive political change, and union democracy is complicated. Although the command-and-control culture of the union stifles effective challenges to the union leadership's positions or priorities, a centralized structure has also allowed the leadership to push through progressive priorities, like support for gun control or same-sex benefits, that were initially met with resistance by some elements of the rank and file.<sup>59</sup> In other words, sometimes progressive change comes from the top down rather than the bottom up. Historically, the caucus system was also defended as the best mechanism to ensure that women and members of other equity-deserving groups, as well as smaller sectors and various regions, were represented in a union structure numerically dominated by men working in the automotive sector.<sup>60</sup> In short, the internal dynamics are complicated, and much hinges on the personal views and priorities of the union's president.

Given that the union has been dominated by a white, male membership, questions of gender and race have gained attention in academic treatments of autoworkers in Canada.<sup>61</sup> Labour scholars Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage have highlighted that the union was firmly committed historically to fighting racial discrimination in housing and other facets of society, despite its tolerance of sex-based discrimination in the workplace and in the union.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in her study of the gender politics of the UAW in Canada, Pamela Sugiman has brought attention to the paradox of the union's outward focus on human rights and social justice in contrast to its internal ambivalence about sex-based discrimination in auto plants and collective agreements, like separate seniority lists and job designations.<sup>63</sup> Given its sectoral breadth, Unifor is much more demographically diverse than the CAW or the UAW, but as of 2022, women still made up only 28 percent of its membership.<sup>64</sup> Although women and members of equity-deserving groups have made great strides within the union through equity committees and by securing designated positions on the NEB as part of Unifor's founding constitution, there is little evidence that demographic shifts in the union's composition provide any clear explanations for the union's political transformations.

A final internal dynamic that is key to our analysis is the continued centrality of the automotive sector inside the union. The automotive sector was the bread and butter of the UAW and the CAW, and the continued

significance of the sector to Unifor is impossible to deny. Although the automotive sector no longer composes a majority of the union's membership, it remains Unifor's largest subsector and still funds much of the union's education and job-transition programs.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, a higher share of dues is derived from members working at the (Ford, GM, and Chrysler) given the higher-than-average wages in this sector. Thus the automotive sector's continued centrality in the union's profile and priorities endures and still appears to drive much of the union's politics.<sup>66</sup>

## METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Our analysis relies on primary archival sources and on in-depth interviews with key informants to examine the evolution of the politics of the CAW and Unifor while situating the union in historical context and seeking to understand the organization in terms of its concrete practices rather than its stated objectives or values. This approach is key to revealing the dynamics that have driven change within the union over time. In this opening chapter, we have outlined the arguments and main themes of the book while situating CAW/Unifor within the broader labour movement and Canadian economy.

We chart these themes chronologically through an examination of key moments in the union's history. We begin in [Chapter 2](#) by exploring the union's political history, starting with the founding and development of the Canadian section of the UAW. The chapter focuses on the interplay between political-economic conditions and internal union dynamics in shaping the union's political outlook. This outlook, we argue, also helps to explain how and why leaders of the UAW in Canada were able to pull off a successful breakaway that led to the creation of the CAW in 1985. This chapter also highlights the historical links between the UAW/CAW and the NDP, emphasizing the strong educational, organizational, and financial ties to the party while acknowledging the union's consistent desire to preserve its own political capacities and perspectives.

[Chapter 3](#) explores the tensions that emerged between the CAW and the NDP in the late 1980s and early 1990s amid a crisis in social democratic electoralism and the rise of neoliberalism. Specifically, the chapter describes how the 1988 "Free Trade" election and the passage of the Social Contract

Act by Bob Rae's government in Ontario in 1993 exposed major schisms in the party-union relationship, leading to public denunciations and the CAW's significant withdrawal of funding and support for the NDP. The chapter also reveals how constitutional turmoil in the early 1990s led the union's Quebec section to forge a closer relationship to the sovereignist Bloc Québécois at the expense of the NDP. This period is critical for understanding the role that the union came to play as the NDP's most significant left critic and explores how the party-union dynamic was altered as a result.

**Chapter 4** explores the CAW's role in fostering a syndicalist politics rooted in street protest and in global justice activism as an alternative to social democratic electoralism in the wake of the Ontario NDP government's defeat at the hands of Mike Harris's Conservatives in 1995. The chapter examines the contradictions, internal debates, and struggles that characterized this period of the union's history, focusing on the Days of Action demonstrations in Ontario and concluding with the defeat of the CAW-backed New Politics Initiative, which proposed the launch of a new left party at the 2001 federal NDP convention. The chapter reveals a union that was struggling with its own political identity and unsure of what strategies and tactics to adopt in the face of an unprecedented assault on workers' rights and a state-led crackdown on extra-parliamentary politics in the wake of 9/11.

The union's retreat from syndicalism did not drive it back into the arms of the NDP but rather fostered a defensive brand of politics heavily reliant on anti-Conservative strategic voting and closer relations with Liberals in Ontario and at the federal level. This strategy, explored in **Chapter 5**, was initially justified as a form of electoral harm reduction. However, strategic voting was gradually expanded to justify pragmatic and transactional relationships with key Liberal politicians and was bolstered on the economic front by unprecedented cross-class alliances with employers to protect jobs and investments in the face of economic crises, accelerated job loss, and devastating plant closures.

**Chapter 6** highlights how these external economic pressures helped to precipitate the CAW's merger with the CEP in 2013. Although the question of political strategy was initially sidestepped in the merger process, it would not take long for the new union to resolve this question in favour of anti-Conservative strategic voting. The 2014 Ontario provincial election proved

key in consolidating Unifor's political approach and validated strategic voting on a go-forward basis. We demonstrate, however, that the basis for strategic voting has continued to evolve along with the union, highlighting the transactional dimensions of Unifor's politics that are reminiscent of Gomerism but are pursued under the guise of anti-Conservative strategic voting.

Chapter 7 is focused on Unifor's founding president, Jerry Dias, and on the political stamp that he left on the union. A controversial figure, Dias cozied up to Premier Doug Ford and forged close ties to Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau in an effort to boost Unifor's political clout. Dias's access and influence evaporated overnight in the wake of a kickback scandal that prompted his early retirement and a police investigation. The unprecedented campaign for the presidency of the union that followed Dias's fall from grace exposed deep political divisions within Unifor and opened the door to challenging the union's direction on a range of fronts, thus introducing a new chapter in the union's history.

Although the book's focus is on the CAW and Unifor, its themes have implications for all unions and movements seeking to build workers' capacities and to leverage workers' collective power both in the workplace and at the ballot box. Thus the book concludes by summarizing Unifor's political transformation and by considering how it affects the broader labour movement.



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