Bob White, trade union bureaucrat who led Canadian split from UAW, dies aged 81

By Carl Bronski
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[comments]This article should have photos. If you can't find any others please use the headshots of White and Bieber and the 1984 GM strike from this WSWS article: HYPERLINK "http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/09/30/cana-s30.html" http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/09/30/cana-s30.html [/comments]

The death in February at the age of 81 of long-time Canadian union leader Bob White has elicited a series of fawning retrospectives and eulogies from a veritable Who's Who of the political, media and trade union establishments. White came to prominence as the architect of the 1984-85, nationally-based split in the United Auto Workers, which resulted in the creation of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)—the precursor to today's Unifor union.

Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted, "Bob White stood up for Canadian workers and fought for a more equitable country." Bob Rae, the former New Democratic Party Ontario Premier cum interim Liberal leader in the last parliament, lionized White as "truly a visionary," "a courageous man" who "did so much for social justice and working families."

Unifor President Jerry Dias said White was "a hero to so many of us. He was a pioneer when it came to Canadian workers controlling their own destiny and showing we can stand up to large American corporations as a small country."

The press was no less full of accolades. "A heart of gold and nerves of steel," headlined the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's obituary. To the *Windsor Star*, White was a "patriot." Even the right-wing *Toronto Sun* termed White a labour "giant."

In reality, White was utterly undeserving of his media-burnished image as a militant. A career union bureaucrat, he came to personify the nationalist, pro-capitalist politics that have led the working class in Canada and internationally into a blind alley.

White's evolution and legacy merit review by auto and other workers, but from the standpoint of understanding what lies behind the collapse of any union resistance to the ruling class assault on jobs, living standards, and worker rights and their transformation into junior partners of the corporations.

[subead]A career union bureaucrat

White emigrated to Canada from Northern Ireland as a boy, along with his family. He left school at the age of 15 and took employment in a UAW-organized Woodstock, Ontario furniture factory. Beginning in 1952, when he was not yet 18, White was elected to a series of union positions in the plant. By 1960, he was working full time as a union "staffer." Tellingly, White notes in his memoir that the first, and one of the most valuable, lessons he learned from his chief mentor in the UAW bureaucracy was that "any dumb *sonovabitch* " can take workers out on strike, "The test is: can you put them back?"

Having steadily climbed the ladder of the UAW union apparatus, White was elevated in 1972 to be the right-hand man of Dennis McDermott, the Director of the UAW's Canadian region. Six years later, he replaced McDermott as Canadian Director.

After the split with the UAW, White led the newly-formed CAW. In 1992, he resigned as CAW president so as to become president of the Canadian Labour Congress, a post he held until his retirement in 1999.

White cut his teeth in the trade union movement at the height of the post- World War II boom. Between 1946 and 1972, real per capita income in Canada more than doubled. In the wake of the 1965 Canada-US Auto Pact, hiring in the auto assembly and parts industries sky-rocketed. Workers unhappy with a particular job, or even a foreman, could walk down the street and gain employment in another factory. For a short period, under these conditions, workers won as many contract struggles as they lost, although often this required that they defy the conservative, virulently anti-communist union apparatus. Between 1965 and 1975 there was a flurry of wildcat strikes.

But the contradictions of capitalism soon returned with a vengeance. The halcyon days (for some) of full employment, shop floor offensives and economic boom gave way to stagflation, wage controls, then recession and a world of chronic unemployment and ever growing social inequality. Around the time that White ascended in 1978 to the directorship of the Canadian section of the UAW things were spiraling downward and the ruling class in the advanced capitalist countries was moving to repudiate policies of social reform and class compromise for good. This shift would soon be personified in the rule of Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain.

During the Chrysler bailout of 1979-80, the UAW set a new standard for labour-management collabouration, when it worked hand-in-glove with the company to shut down plants, eliminate 50,000 of its members' jobs, and impose $600 million in wage cuts and other concessions. In Canada, where inflation was a more immediate threat to workers than job losses, both because prices were rising more rapidly and Chrysler's facilities were more modern, White and the Canadian UAW leadership initially refused to reopen the contract. They did so on the grounds that the contract-reopening was an attack on "Canadian sovereignty," since it was the US government that was tying financial aid to Chrysler to immediate worker concessions.

In keeping with this nationalist premise, the Canadian UAW made no appeal to US auto workers, where there was deep opposition. Ultimately it backed down even from this and put the wage- and job-cutting agreement negotiated by the UAW leadership before Chrysler Canada workers "without recommendation."

Subsequently, in the 1982 bargaining round with the Detroit Three automakers, White and the Canadian UAW leadership agreed to significant rollbacks, only not as large as those in the US.

The UAW split and the formation of the CAW

Contract negotiations on both sides of the border with GM in 1984 brought divisions between the UAW leadership in Detroit and its Canadian section to a head. In the concessions contract negotiated for

American GM workers by UAW President Owen Bieber, the UAW agreed to meager lump sum payments instead of the traditional wage increase, established a corporatist network of labour-management committees to oversee speed-up, and granted new give-backs to the company on job security provisions. The agreement met militant resistance from the membership but eventually was ratified by a narrow margin.

When Canadian GM workers refused to accept this concessions-laden settlement as the basis for their own contract and struck the company for the first time in 14 years, Bieber openly sided with GM Chairman Roger Smith, threatened to cut off strike funds to the Canadian workers and divulged inside information to GM management designed to sabotage the Canadian strike.

In the ensuing two-week period, White wrapped himself in the Canadian flag, and in order to gain a short-term reprieve from the downsizing push by the global auto industry, and over the heads of the Canadian membership, pulled the Canadian section out of the UAW. “This is coming from me as a leader of the union,” he declared. “It’s not being pushed from the bottom by the rank-and-file.” Presented with a fait-accompli by the leadership and persuaded by the nationalist tub-thumping of White—who was quickly becoming the darling of the Canadian media—the membership eventually voted by large margins to endorse the split.

As White later admitted in his autobiography *Hard Bargains*, he led the secession of the Canadian division of the union in 1984-85 because he feared and opposed the prospect of a united struggle by Canadian and US autoworkers against the concessions policy of the UAW leadership. The UAW leadership well recognized this, and that is why, notwithstanding their vitriol against White, they ultimately gave the CAW $42 million at its formation. The newly independent Canadian union would begin negotiating its own concessions contracts in Windsor and St. Therese, Quebec shortly after its official founding.

The horrendous give-backs engineered by Bieber in the years immediately prior to the 1984-85 split were temporarily opposed by the Canadian UAW/CAW leadership, not on the basis of opposition to the subordination of workers’ livelihoods to investor profit, but on the calculation that the automakers enjoyed a substantial labour cost advantage in Canada, due to the lower value of the Canadian dollar, state-funded health insurance (Medicare), and newer, more productive plants.

White and the Canadian bureaucrats were also aware that Canadian workers were more resistant to wage concessions because their paychecks were being eroded far more quickly by ballooning inflation and high interest rates.

The breakaway of the Canadian region was thus not a means of opposing concessions and defending autoworkers. Rather, it enabled White and the CAW apparatus to pursue a more “independent” policy, whereby it could exploit what it soon came to call the “Canadian advantage” so as to strike deals with the automakers that called for smaller givebacks, while keeping the automakers’ labour costs below those at their American operations.

The record and role of White’s CAW

In 1986 a National Film Board documentary , *HYPERLINK "http://www.nfb.ca/film/final_offer/" Final Offer*, depicting the events leading to the split was released nationwide. The film portrayed White as a tenacious negotiator who was not without a certain affability. The depictions of shop-floor life, the gruelling work on the line and the day-to-day militant resistance of rank-and-file workers to speed-up and management caprice struck a chord with the hundreds of thousands of workers who viewed the film and associated White with this resistance.

But the film, as well as the myth that has subsequently grown up around White, ignores decisive facts in the historical record. As the story goes, White had no option but to break away from the double-dealing regime of Owen Bieber. But White consistently opposed making any appeal to American workers for a joint struggle against concessions, although there was seething opposition among rank-and-file workers in the US.

Throughout 1985 the Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Parties in Canada and the United States, campaigned to oppose the splitting of the UAW along nationalist lines and called on workers on both sides of the border to fight to preserve the unity of North American autoworkers, which had been forged in the historic struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. As a Workers League pamphlet widely distributed among autoworkers correctly explained, “The split now opens the way to a competitive bidding war between American and Canadian autoworkers, each seeking to undercut the other by offering lower labour costs and higher profits to the auto companies.”

It argued that instead of breaking the international unity of autoworkers, White could have waged a joint struggle against concessions by tapping into the immense oppositional sentiment among American autoworkers reeling from years of layoffs and concessions. White refused to consider this. “I didn’t become the leader of the workers’ revolutionary league overnight,” he said, “just because we are taking an independent course.”

The birth of the CAW in 1985 sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers and gave a huge opening for the Detroit Three auto companies to intensify their practice of “whip-sawing” contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border to secure the lowest possible wages, benefits and employment levels.

The newly founded CAW was promoted by the middle-class pseudo-left as a bastion of militancy, a supposedly progressive alternative to the business unionism practiced by American-based labour organizations. The balance sheet of the CAW’s breakaway from the UAW and its subsequent re-branding as Unifor shows something quite different.

In the years following the split, the CAW pressed workers to secure product placements and investment by offering capital the highest rate of return, and otherwise served as auxiliaries of management in meeting production and profit targets. This was accompanied by an unbridled promotion of chauvinism and protectionism, which has served to split the working class and rally workers behind one or another rival capitalist elite.

White played a key role in this. Egged on by overwhelmingly favourable coverage in Canada’s corporate media, he emerged in the years following the split as the standard-bearer for a virulent Canadian nationalism. He led Canada’s unions in opposing the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement in alliance with the Liberal Party and sections of big business, like Magna boss Frank Stronach, who feared that they would lose out in competition with larger US firms.

Then, when the FTA was implemented, leading to a wave of plant closures, as industry was reorganized for the continental market, White and the CAW railed against “Canadian jobs” being lost to the “Americans,” while doing nothing to oppose the job cuts.

During his two-terms as CLC president, White was largely invisible. The mid-1990s saw a massive assault on public and social services as the federal Liberal, Ontario Conservative and Quebec PQ governments implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. But White and the unions systematically suppressed worker opposition. In Quebec, with White’s blessing, the unions endorsed the PQ’s “zero-deficit campaign,” while in Ontario mass protests against the Harris government were quickly shut down and the unions, with the CAW in the lead, threw their support behind the Liberals.

Under conditions of the globalization of production, the increasingly nationalist, pro-company policies of the unions have proven utterly disastrous for autoworkers and for communities dependent on the auto

industry. Concessions have failed to save jobs, with each round of givebacks leading to another. The globally organized automakers, aided and assisted by the unions, used every fresh giveback as a lever to press workers in another country or at another plant for still more.

In Canada, more than two-thirds of all unionized auto assembly jobs have been lost since the split. Two-tier wage systems operate in both countries, defined benefit pension schemes exist only for the small and rapidly retiring group of veteran workers, traditional cost-of-living allowances are eroded or abolished and speed-up on the line continues unabated. In both countries, the unions back big-business parties that are complicit in the relentless attacks on the living standards of working people.

The CAW/Unifor has long since ceased to be a workers' organization. Since the split, it has steadily transformed itself into a business whose financial interests are directly tied to the increased exploitation of the working class. Like the UAW it has cultivated the closest corporatist ties with big business and the government.

Such is the real "legacy" of the nationalist poison pushed by White and subsequent leaders of the unions on both sides of the Canada-US border.

This author also recommends :

The lessons of the Canadian autoworkers' contract struggle
[19 November 2016]

1937: When Canadian and US autoworkers fought together
[20 October 2016]