

Canadian workers — and voters — are at the mercy of the union bosses' partisan whims

Terrance Oakey, National Post | 14/06/17

Another election campaign has come and gone in Ontario, and one certainty remains: the province's unions will not hesitate to use the billions of dollars in forced contributions they collect from workers to influence the political process. Ontarians are familiar with the so-called Working Families Coalition, a union-funded entity that reportedly spent up to \$10-million on advertising during the 2011 election campaign (and who knows how much this time). But that is just the tip of the iceberg. All kinds of labour organizations publicly denounced Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservatives, including the usual suspects like teachers, public servants, UNIFOR and the Ontario Federation of Labour.

More troubling were interventions from organizations the public expects to be above politics, like the Ontario Provincial Police Association and the Southern Ontario News Media Guild.

And some were just bizarre, like the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, over which the Province of Ontario has no jurisdiction whatsoever, but which nonetheless felt the need to advise its members not to vote Conservative.

Just watching the ads or reading the headlines, you could easily assume unionized Ontarians were unanimously opposed to the Conservatives. Yet did you see a single poll of those workers asking their voting preferences? Did unions ask their rank and file if they wanted their leadership to endorse or denounce a particular party? Of course not. Union bosses have free reign.

Canada is truly unique in this regard. In the United States, unionized workers can opt out of the portion of their dues that would be used for activities not related to collective bargaining, such as political campaigns. Likewise, France, Ireland, Italy and Germany all have legislation prohibiting the use of compulsory dues for contributions to political parties or candidates. In the United Kingdom, employees cannot even be compelled to join a union as a condition of employment — unlike in Canada, where workers have to pay dues or find another job.

Unions and other Canadian labour organizations do not even have to disclose to their members or the general public anything about their financial activities, creating a two-headed electoral monster: a multi-billion dollar slush fund for union bosses to engage in politics, and no transparency or accountability over how they spend the money.



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Canadians should be concerned about this murky world of election financing, since union bosses are so clearly trying to influence outcomes. A press release from UNIFOR on election night boasted that it, along with “other unions and progressive groups, is proud to have been part of the movement that successfully prevented Hudak from forming a majority government.” “The Stop Hudak campaign forces Hudak to resign,” the Ontario Federation of Labour’s Sid Ryan Tweeted. “He took on Labour and lost. We are coming after Harper next.”

Unions should be free to engage in the political process however they wish, but they should not be allowed to do so with forced contributions from workers, and with no transparency. There are two simple solutions to this problem.

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First, unionized Canadians should enjoy the same freedom as their counterparts in other countries to opt out of the portion of their dues used for purposes other than collective bargaining. Unions could still raise funds for their political campaigns, but on a voluntary basis like any other organization. Indeed, if union bosses are truly representing the interests of their workers, they should have no trouble raising money.

Second, it is time to shine a light on union finances, as mandated in a bill currently sitting before the Senate. This too is something required in the rest of the developed world, and long overdue in Canada. If unions want to play politics, then the public has a right to know how much of their time and money is being used for that purpose.

For a country that has gone to such great lengths to mandate transparency in the electoral process, it is remarkable that unions can still spend millions influencing the political process with little to no public scrutiny. That has to change.

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