

# The Magna sell-out

## The CAW deal is a threat to independent unionism

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As the Ontario Federation of Labour meets in convention next week, the Canadian labour movement faces plenty of challenges. From the collapse of the manufacturing sector to growing economic inequality, it's clear that working men and women have never needed effective workplace representation more than they need it now.

The question is "what kind of representation?" In this age of insecure, contingent work, contrasted with soaring CEO incomes, the best hope of ordinary people to win some dignity and exercise some control over their working lives is independent democratic unionism -- with workers having the right to freely choose their own representatives in the workplace, their own bargaining committees, their own local union officers.

However, within the labour movement itself, this is no longer a universal consensus. The deal struck between the Canadian Auto Workers and Magna International Inc. is a major blow against independent unionism.

There's little doubt that the agreement reached between the CAW and Magna has champagne corks popping in Bay Street boardrooms. Business and economic elites have a lot at stake in the so-called "Framework for Fairness."

It's not hard to see why. The Magna-CAW pact not only eliminates the right to strike, it takes away the right of workers to elect their own representatives without the boss's participation -- a vastly more insidious weakening of workers' rights because of its daily implications.

The CAW has agreed to scrap the election of "stewards" by their co-workers, and replace it with a complex system of "employee advocates" and "fairness committees," unaccountable to the union. Instead, Magna workers who seek to be appointed as "employee advocates" (a maximum of one per factory) are assessed by "fairness committees" made up of management and union members. However, the union members are not allowed to view their roles as "union representatives nor does their role include the representation of employees."

It gets worse. Magna workers are denied the right to directly elect their own local union leadership. We encourage everyone who has only heard the chest-thumping publicity from both Magna and the CAW to read the actual "Framework for Fairness" agreement for yourselves. It will open your eyes.

The deal is defended by the CAW as an innovation and step forward, but it is nothing of the sort. The "framework" is a throwback to the days of Mackenzie King-style "company unionism."

"Company unions," whether the King model or the Stronach-Hargrove model, simply entrench paternalistic styles of management, loved by non-union employers everywhere. They are designed to silence workers' voices and ensure that workers' priorities are in lockstep with bosses' priorities.

The CAW-Magna deal follows the pattern faithfully. And the undersigned union leaders, from a broad spectrum of Ontario's economic life, do not underestimate the potential damage of these dealings.

We do not dispute that the CAW can choose such arrangements. It is free to do so, dependent on its own internal checks and balances. But the blatant publicity effort that has accompanied this deal means that critical comment from other unions cannot be a surprise to anyone.

The Magna-CAW transaction will encourage unionized employers across Canada to slap comparable "deals" on every bargaining table in the years ahead. And non-union employers have been handed a new weapon for stalling organizing drives: "You don't need your own democratic voices or the right to strike-- the CAW says so!"

It seems pretty clear that this deal will help production and employment to flow out of the Big Three auto assemblers and other auto-parts makers, and into Magna, where workers will lack time-tested union rights and capacities, and where labour costs are significantly lower than in the Big Three. We agree with critics inside the CAW who are deeply concerned about the long-term effects of this deal.

Is there a silver lining? Oddly enough, we believe there is.

The result of the Magna sell-out could mean employers will face a much more militant labour movement in the days ahead. That possibility will certainly be reflected in the debates on the floor of the OFL convention, which promise to be feisty and inspiring.

Our unions intend to put every one of the employers we face on notice that they can forget about trying to import the Magna deal into our existing collective agreements, or into agreements for workers who join our unions in the future. Our activists expect us to continue to strengthen independent democratic unionism, not weaken it. And let us be very clear -- we will not give up the right to strike under any circumstances.

We will continue to oppose company unionism with engaged, energized and active democratic unionism. It's too bad this fight has been provoked by one union going in the other direction, but that doesn't weaken our resolve. Working people deserve nothing less from us than a full-out commitment to enhancing their rights, not rolling them back.

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