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The Past, Present, and Future of the Canadian Labour Movement

Interrogating Insider Accounts

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

The Past, Present, and Future of the Canadian Labour Movement: Interrogating Insider Accounts

Larry Savage

Sid Ryan, *A Grander Vision: My Life in the Labour Movement* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2019)

Fred Wilson, *A New Kind of Union: Unifor and the Birth of the Modern Canadian Union* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2019)

In recounting his working-class Irish upbringing, Sid Ryan, former president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario Division and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), laments, “At times, people in the working class can be very cruel to each other.”¹ Perhaps unintentionally, this observation from his childhood frames much of the content of his autobiography, *A Grander Vision: My Life in the Labour Movement*, in which Ryan documents how he navigated a series of political struggles and internecine union leadership battles during a two-decade career in Canada’s union movement.

Ryan’s eventual fall from grace was largely precipitated by Unifor’s decision to back one of their own to replace him at the helm of the OFL in 2015. The process leading to the creation of Unifor and its tumultuous first five years as a new union are the subjects of Fred Wilson’s book *A New Kind of Union: Unifor and the Birth of the Modern Canadian Union*. Wilson, a former director of strategic planning for Unifor, played a central role in creating Canada’s largest private-sector union in 2013 through a merger of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP).

1. Sid Ryan, *A Grander Vision: My Life in the Labour Movement* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2019), 32.

Both books reveal some fascinating insights into the inner machinations of the contemporary Canadian labour movement even if their respective political aims are at cross-purposes. Ryan's autobiography covers his whole life – describing his working-class upbringing, why and how he ended up in Canada, his tumultuous and contentious climb up the leadership ladder of the Ontario division of CUPE, his first-hand accounts of internal union power struggles and political battles with governments of all stripes at Queen's Park – and concludes with a call for the labour movement to adopt a “grander vision” that embraces policy directions and political strategies that could broadly be described as social unionist.

The first third of *A Grander Vision*, a lively look at Ryan's working-class upbringing in Dublin in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, focuses on his family's experience of poverty, his entry into the workforce as a “lounge boy,” and his transition to skilled trades work. Ryan's work as a plumber eventually took him to Belfast. His time in Northern Ireland coincided with the Troubles – the decades-long conflict between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists marked by “horrific crimes, brutal repression, and civil unrest.”² Ryan's experience in Belfast had a profound impact on him and unleashed a political awakening of sorts: “I was astonished by the scale of the injustices stacked against the Catholic community. I found it hard to believe that the state was complicit in blatant acts of discrimination against an entire community based solely on their religion.” He writes, “I learned that the majority can behave as tyrants. These lessons stayed with me.”³

Eventually, economic circumstances and the tumultuous political situation in Ireland convinced Ryan to look for opportunities in Canada, where he quickly secured work as a steamfitter at the Kendall Company factory in Toronto's east end. In short order, he was actively involved in a successful union organizing drive at the plant and became a shop steward. Shortly thereafter, Ryan made the move to Ontario Hydro's nuclear division, where he became heavily involved in his new union, CUPE. A decade and a half later, he would become president of CUPE Ontario, the province's largest union. Ryan was elected CUPE Ontario president in 1992, having run against and defeated the candidate favoured by CUPE National president Judy Darcy, kicking off a tense relationship between the National and the Ontario division that persists to this day. In fact, during the course of his decade and a half as president, Ryan recounts, he was forced to fend off several internal challenges to his leadership that were assisted, if not orchestrated, by CUPE National. Specifically, Ryan argues that it became a “time honoured tradition” for the National to give a temporary staff position to a rank-and-file CUPE member in order to

2. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 58.

3. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 59.

put them into a better position to challenge for the presidency of the Ontario division.⁴ None, however, came close to defeating him.

Ryan rose to prominence in the labour movement by emerging as one of the staunchest opponents of the anti-union Social Contract austerity exercise of Bob Rae's NDP government. Ryan's insider account of the Social Contract negotiations is particularly illuminating. While most accounts treat the battle as having had two sides (government and the public-sector unions), Ryan reminds us that even among the Public Services Coalition that formed to resist the Social Contract, "meetings became a complicated struggle between unions that wanted a genuine discussion aimed at finding a workable solution to the monumental problem Rae had created and those who were willing to cave so the NDP could save face."⁵ These divisions facilitated the Rae government's ultimately unsuccessful attempts to play public-sector unions off against one another. Rae, according to Ryan, had "masqueraded as a champion of the working class," and the fallout from his Social Contract exercise ultimately contributed to his undoing as premier.⁶ According to Ryan, in pursuing an austerity agenda in the form of the Social Contract, Rae "was trying to appease his persecutors" in the business community. "Why he couldn't see that these bandits would never be appeased until he was run out of office baffled me."⁷ Of course, Ryan was no fan of Liberal or Conservative governments either – a point underscored by an amusing anecdote about his decision to turn down an offer from Mike Harris to run for the Ontario PC Party in the 1995 provincial election.

While Ryan became a media magnet for his outspoken opposition to provincial governments, he was also an unapologetic champion of international human rights. No doubt shaped by his Irish experience, Ryan was a fierce critic of Israel's treatment of Palestinians and his union became enveloped in controversy when it nearly unanimously endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement at its 2006 convention, seeking to build pressure against Israel and bring the country into compliance with international law vis-à-vis its relationship with the Palestinian population. Ryan recalls the firestorm that ignited as a result of the decision but has no regrets. Instead, he doubles down on his support for BDS and uses quotes by former federal Liberal leader and Harvard scholar Michael Ignatieff and South African archbishop and Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu to reinforce his own comparison between the oppression faced by Palestinians at the hands of Israel and the treatment of blacks in the former apartheid regime in South Africa.

4. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 181.

5. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 142.

6. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 150.

7. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 133.

Ryan made the transition to the OFL presidency in 2009 almost seamlessly and without opposition despite a reputation as an irritant among fellow labour leaders, especially those associated with the “pink paper” unions that had remained loyal to the NDP through the Social Contract years. In contrast to his predecessor, Wayne Samuelson, Ryan became a fixture in the news media and was determined to use the OFL to rally rank-and-file union members to an activist agenda. It did not take long for this approach to annoy key OFL affiliates who were used to calling the shots. Attempts by some of these affiliates to rein in Ryan through threats of disaffiliation and accusations of harassment or bullying were successfully rebuffed, but only at first. During Ryan’s last term, the combined weight of a financial squeeze caused by a coordinated dues strike and the growing chorus of union leaders calling for Ryan’s head became too much to bear. He opted not to run for re-election in 2015.

Despite the never-ending controversies that brewed during his final term at the OFL, Ryan points to the federation’s 2014 Workers’ Rights campaign as one of his greatest achievements. The campaign, designed to block the election of Ontario PC leader Tim Hudak, a staunch opponent of unions, involved a combination of media strategy, face-to-face conversations with members, and strategic political mobilization. Ryan credits the campaign for the outcome of the provincial election: the re-election of Kathleen Wynne’s Liberals and seat losses for the Tories. However, this section of the book reads like selective amnesia. While it remains an open question whether it was the OFL’s campaign or the Tories’ own self-inflicted wounds that torpedoed the Ontario PC campaign, there is no question that the OFL’s Workers’ Rights campaign let the governing Liberals off the hook for years of healthcare underfunding and a dismal record on a range of labour issues, including a failure to provide meaningful collective-bargaining rights for education workers and migrant agricultural labourers and repeated refusals to restore anti-scab legislation or card-based union certification. Hudak’s defeat notwithstanding, Ryan’s decision to frame the re-election of Wynne’s neoliberal government as a victory for labour is odd given that it clearly demonstrates the extent of labour’s political weakness rather than its strength. It is also surprising that Ryan would highlight this particular campaign as a success given that he spends much of the book roundly criticizing union leaders for their sustained support for strategic voting, shotgun alliances with Liberals, and the loosening of partisan ties to the New Democratic Party. Without splitting hairs, the OFL’s Workers’ Rights campaign was ultimately an anti-Conservative strategic voting campaign. It was designed not to build support for the NDP but rather to rally union members and community groups in opposition to the election of PC candidates. In the vast majority of ridings, that meant casting ballots for Ontario Liberal candidates who were best positioned to stop Hudak and his PC team. While Ryan and the OFL never used the term “strategic voting” to describe the campaign, there is no question that its messaging and parameters directly dovetailed

with the overt strategic voting tactics of Unifor, building and construction trades unions, teachers' unions, and a growing list of OFL affiliates.

Ryan concludes his autobiography with a call to action, advocating for a "grander vision" for the labour movement and embrace of social unionist principles, frames, and modes of action. In addition to the re-establishment of stronger partisan ties to the NDP, he argues specifically for a common-front approach to organizing in concert with community groups, a commitment to tackling broader working-class issues like precarious work and food security, adoption of the Leap Manifesto to address the climate crisis, and greater solidarity with migrant workers.

Ryan has always been a polarizing figure and his autobiography is unlikely to change how people within or outside the movement feel about his politics or leadership style. Early on in the book, Ryan explains that he almost died at birth from the umbilical cord being wrapped around his neck. "I'm sure many employers in Canada wish that cord had been a little bit tighter," he jokes.⁸ That wish could likely have been extended to a number of union leaders as well. Ryan spends much of his autobiography recounting run-ins, feuds, and battles with former CUPE National president Judy Darcy, Jerry Dias and Chris Buckley of Unifor, Ontario Public Service Employees Union president Smokey Thomas, Service Employees International Union president Sharleen Stewart, former OFL president Gord Wilson, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) president Hassan Yussuff – the list goes on. While Ryan's insider accounts of these battles are vivid, he clearly has an axe to grind, and the reader is often left to wonder about the other side of the story.

Unifor and its leadership are treated as the chief antagonists in much of Ryan's autobiography. He repeatedly targets the union for its lack of principle, its duplicity, and its democratic deficit. There is no question that Unifor played a major role in Ryan's eventual ouster as OFL president in 2015. While Fred Wilson never mentions Ryan by name in *A New Kind of Union*, he is unapologetic about the campaigns Unifor ran to secure its preferred candidates to the presidencies of the CLC and provincial labour federations in Ontario and British Columbia in the name of "unity" and "renewal."⁹ Wilson's book, however, is focused primarily on the process of creating Unifor and gives the reader an inside look at the nuts and bolts of one of Canada's most historically significant union mergers.

Unifor's genesis can be traced back to a seven-page document, co-authored by Wilson and long-time CAW chief economist Jim Stanford, entitled "A Moment of Truth for Canadian Labour." The document framed the continued erosion of private-sector union density, the failure of organizing initiatives

8. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 34.

9. Fred Wilson, *A New Kind of Union: Unifor and the Birth of the Modern Canadian Union* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2019), 159.

to keep pace with plant closures and labour-market growth, the decline in labour's share of the national wealth, new levels of political hostility and growing negative public opinion toward unions, aggressive attacks by global employers, dramatic generational change within unions, and the paralysis and dysfunction of some union centrals as a crisis for a Canadian labour movement in need of urgent renewal.

Peter Kennedy (Unifor) and Gaétan Ménard (CEP) – the second-in-command of their respective unions – joined Wilson and Stanford at the helm of the project that would eventually become the new union project. While neither the CAW nor the CEP was new to mergers, this particular coming together would be unprecedented given its size and scope. The joint committees formed to build the new union had to contend with significant organizational, personal, and cultural barriers. For example, Wilson describes heated debates concerning the perceived benefits of the CAW's centralized versus the CEP's decentralized structures. Architects of the new union argued about whether the preservation of regional vice-president positions (a holdover from the CEP) would encourage the development of competing fiefdoms. They sparred over the rights of retirees to participate in the new union and the proper role of the Québec director. Electoral strategy was another sticking point, with the CAW firmly committed to strategic voting and the CEP still closely affiliated with the NDP. Both sides decided that the question of electoral strategy could be settled after the merger, and it was, in favour of strategic voting. Committee members overseeing the merger also went back and forth about how to balance representation and delegate allocation at union conventions and debated dues structures and the administration of strike pay. In short, they had a lot of details to sort out and many obstacles to overcome. In the end, the architects settled on a "balance between democratic centralism and autonomous regional, sectoral and equity structures to ensure diversity and encourage local initiative and innovation."¹⁰

The debates about the new union's structure take up the lion's share of the book, but Wilson does more than provide a chronological and detailed account of Unifor's creation. The narrative is often broken up by anecdotes that most observers of the Canadian labour movement will find very interesting. For example, Wilson reveals that United Steelworker (USW) International president Leo Gerard was approached about including the Canadian section of the USW in the new union project but ultimately rejected the proposal.¹¹ Wilson also reveals, in his recounting of the internal debates about what the new union would call itself, that early proposed names included Canadian Workers Union, Uni21, One Voice, and Union Alliance. When the new union project's communications working group officially settled on the name "Unifor" and presented their recommendation to leadership of the CAW and CEP, then CAW

10. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 71.

11. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 186.

president Ken Lewenza is reported to have responded, "I just don't know what it means," and Jerry Dias "was more negative and dismissively flippant in his tone" before finally warming up to the name.¹²

Controversially, Wilson argues that the new union was conceived as a change agent in the labour movement and makes the case that Unifor has delivered on that promise. Specifically, he argues that Unifor represents a union-renewal success story insofar that it has successfully adopted new principles, structures, and models of representation that reflect profound structural changes in both the economy and the working class. He holds up Unifor-supported regime change at the CLC, OFL, and British Columbia Federation of Labour as evidence of the new union's might and boldly claims that "Unifor, and the labour politics it unleashed, was a material factor in defeating labour's worst political adversaries in critical provincial and federal elections, and it established a political influence for Canadian labour unseen in recent history."¹³ While it is true that the government of Stephen Harper went down to defeat in 2015, Unifor's role in delivering that outcome is difficult to measure. However, at the provincial level, the electoral ledger has swung strongly toward conservative parties during Unifor's first five years despite the union's sustained support for anti-conservative strategic voting.

The reality is that Unifor's track record on various fronts is far more mixed than Wilson is prepared to acknowledge. He is correct to note that the new union's executive structure does break new ground. Even though the merger committees that produced Unifor were overwhelmingly driven by white men, they successfully recommended a new executive structure with a constitutional guarantee that the number of women on the executive board could not be less than the proportionate share of women in the union overall. The Unifor national executive also includes designated positions for workers of colour and Indigenous workers. These represent significant equity breakthroughs.

Unifor's most exciting and ambitious goal – to become "a union for everyone" – is where the organization has come up most short. Its community chapters program, designed to extend union membership to non-union workers, has never really taken off, and five years after its founding Unifor has only a couple hundred members organized into just two chapters. Arguably, Unifor's community chapters project was stillborn upon the new union's founding. The rights and responsibilities of such chapters was a major point of contention in merger discussions. Ultimately, community chapter members were relegated to second-class standing within the new union, without equal democratic rights, because architects of the merger struggled with how to see beyond a Wagner-based model of union citizenship. With regard to community chapters, Wilson concedes that "the full commitment of resources and focus that are needed has yet to be delivered. This central but unfulfilled

12. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 125.

13. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 20.

objective remains a work in progress with unresolved conceptual and organizational issues.”¹⁴

To his credit, Wilson is not entirely dismissive of critics of Unifor’s first few years, acknowledging that “without a doubt, the union’s power and influence have been wielded inconsistently – at times standing alone on principle, with hardly a chance of success, and at times overly pragmatic to move on to the next predicament or battle.”¹⁵ However, the true test of the union’s success must be to measure its achievements against its stated aims and objectives.

In the book’s introduction, Wilson effectively frames the decline in private-sector union density, and its isolating effects, as a crisis, thus providing a catalyst for the creation of Unifor. However, he provides little evidence that the creation of the new union has curbed, let alone reversed, the trend despite a significant commitment at Unifor’s founding convention of resources dedicated to organizing new workers. In fact, private-sector union density has continued to decline since the establishment of Unifor, the union’s organizing successes have been underwhelming given the strategic priority Unifor has placed on union organizing, and its raiding efforts have been even less successful, if not counterproductive.

Wilson is unapologetic when discussing the 2017–18 raiding allegations against Unifor with respect to Local 113 of the Amalgamated Transit Union and Local 75 of UNITE HERE. Nor does he express regret for Unifor’s decision to disaffiliate from the CLC over a dispute concerning the application and interpretation Article 4 of the Congress’ constitution: the provision that governs disputes between affiliates and provides for a pathway for workers to switch unions. As Dias explains in the book’s foreword, “We see these conflicts as an expression of our solidarity and commitment to democracy in our movement.”¹⁶ However, Wilson’s decision to invoke Unifor’s commitment to rank-and-file democracy as a justification for raiding and for disaffiliation from the CLC rings hollow when one considers that the book’s main focus is a description of a top-down merger process that, by and large, excluded direct involvement from rank-and-file union members. Wilson himself describes how the rank-and-file from both the CAW and CEP only learned of the “unauthorized” merger talks from the news media. Moreover, he acknowledges that mere months before the union’s founding convention in August 2013, a focus-group study revealed that “the membership of the CEP and the CAW are unaware and uninvolved in the process of creating the new union.”¹⁷ How that squares with his understanding of rank-and-file democracy is unclear.

14. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 24.

15. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 23.

16. Jerry Dias, foreword to Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 9.

17. Wilson, *New Kind of Union*, 120.

Sometimes the book's omissions feel as significant as its revelations. For example, the November 2018 announcement by General Motors that it would be winding down its operations in Oshawa is not mentioned – shocking given the news coverage it generated, the sheer number of jobs on the chopping block, and the expensive and nationalist ad campaign the union launched in opposition. There is also no mention of an eyebrow-raising revelation that Dias made a personal campaign contribution to the leadership campaign of Conservative cabinet minister Kellie Leitch – an odd omission given Wilson's contention that Dias is a self-described “democratic socialist” leading a fiercely politically independent union.

Wilson's book and Ryan's autobiography are both clearly intended to defend personal legacies. But each also seeks to claim the mantle of social unionism in defence of that legacy. What is striking is that the social unionist prescriptions found in each book look remarkably similar. Both Wilson and Ryan claim that union power must be broadly class based; both underscore the need for labour to challenge discrimination and exclusion; and both attach significant importance to the voices of the rank-and-file and the need to forge unity both within and outside the labour movement.

If we take what Ryan and Wilson write about social unionism at face value, the differences in the Canadian labour movement are not nearly as big as they may seem. But this raises a question: Why does the labour leadership appear to be trapped in a never-ending cycle of internecine and evolving conflicts? As Ryan himself notes, “the labour movement is often a cauldron of petty grievances that, in some cases, date back to the 1930s.”¹⁸ Each book concludes on an optimistic high note by sketching out similar forward-looking visions for organized labour; however, one cannot help but seriously question how such solidaristic ambitions could be fulfilled given the personalities and entrenched power structures that stand in the way. Luckily, neither the labour movement's history nor its future is based solely on what the labour leadership does and thinks.

A major limitation of autobiography as a genre is that accounts of events are written from a specific perspective that often papers over contradictions and either magnifies or diminishes certain details based on how those details reflect on the book's subject. The story would almost certainly read differently if told from a different vantage point. This is not to suggest that these books are unimportant. On the contrary, they both give readers an insider view that might otherwise be unavailable, but they also sometimes view events and interactions through self-serving rose-coloured glasses, requiring us to read both books with a critical eye. This last point underscores the need for continued independent scholarship about labour-movement personalities, organizations, legacies, and events. Such research is critical to providing a wider lens and a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play.

18. Ryan, *Grander Vision*, 207.