

# Ex-Unifor president Jerry Dias says he's trying to 'move on with my life' after bribery allegations

ROBERT FIFE > OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

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Jerry Dias, former president of UNIFOR, in Toronto on June 12.

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Jerry Dias, once the country's most powerful union leader, was levelled by substance abuse and allegations of bribery but says he is now trying to "move on with my life" and rebuild his dented reputation.

Toronto Police decided not to charge Mr. Dias for allegedly accepting \$50,000 in cash from an unnamed company while Unifor and the former union president reached an undisclosed settlement that ended a bitter dispute about whether he had breached the union's ethics and democratic practices.

For the first time since these matters were announced last month, Mr. Dias spoke exclusively to The Globe and Mail about what ended his nine years at the helm of Canada's largest private-sector union, one with clout in boardrooms, provincial capitals and Parliament Hill.

"I am a lot of things but crooked is not one of them," he said. "The police finished their investigation and aren't proceeding. There is nothing there. All you need to know is that I never took a dime."

Mr. Dias, known as a tough, table-pounding negotiator, can't hide his bitterness at how he says he was treated by Unifor, believing he was a victim of political infighting among factions wishing to lead the union. He's bitter, too, that he was "publicly flogged" before he could tell his side of the story after he entered a treatment facility in Calgary for addiction to opioids, sleeping pills and heavy drinking to deal with a painful sciatic nerve problem.

“They knew I was in agony. Yet on the day I was on the plane to get help they held a Facebook press conference, laying out all my dastardly deeds. Here they are sending me to get help and, at exactly the same time, they are holding a press conference. They publicly shamed me when I was going for help, which was unbelievable.”

Mr. Dias, though, is not keen to discuss what landed him in trouble in the first place.

Chris Macdonald, a longtime friend and former assistant of Mr. Dias, lodged a formal complaint in January, 2022, to then secretary-treasurer and now Unifor president Lana Payne. He told Ms. Payne that Mr. Dias had received \$50,000 as a gift from a third-party supplier of COVID-19 tests.

Mr. Macdonald said he received half of the cash in a bag from Mr. Dias on Jan. 20 in exchange for allegedly promoting the company’s tests to union members.

“That is total bullshit,” Mr. Dias said. “All this nonsense about a supplier, I don’t know where that came from.”

Mr. Dias declined to discuss – when pressed repeatedly – who gave him the money, for what purpose and what he did with it.

“Let’s just say when you are not up to snuff, what you would normally do in three seconds takes three days. But I am not going into it. And here is why. The police did a complete investigation on all of this stuff. I never took one nickel of any money.” he said. “I did the right thing obviously but let’s just say when you are under that type of meds and everything else, let’s just say you are a little slower.”

A source close to Mr. Dias told The Globe that a company that was thankful for Mr. Dias’s efforts to provide Unifor workers with testing kits gave \$50,000 to Mr. Dias. The money was unsolicited, and Mr. Dias returned \$25,000 to the company before Mr. Macdonald went to Unifor to hand over the cash he received, the source said.

“Her election was about me. It wasn’t about her,’ he said. “First thing she did was clean house.”

Mr. Dias alleges Ms. Payne set up a leadership website in February after she hired an outside investigator whose report made him the hot-button issue in that summer’s election for Unifor president.

Ms. Payne denied she set up the website domain because she was contemplating a run at the Unifor presidency. “I did not decide to run for president until April, which is exactly when I announced it,” she said.

In March, Unifor released the investigator’s report that found Mr. Dias accepted the money and breached the union’s code of ethics. He announced his retirement, citing health issues, just three days before the union revealed he was under investigation. Unifor handed Mr. Macdonald’s \$25,000 over to the financial crimes unit of the Toronto Police, which launched an investigation.

“The investigation was hired by someone I would argue who stood to benefit the most. They hired the investigator and released the results and it wasn’t even a complete investigation. How do you have an investigation without interviewing me and they know I was going for help?” Mr. Dias said. “Why did they release it on the exact same day as I am on a plane going to get help? That is about as low as you.”

The report by a Toronto law firm details how in late January and early February Mr. Dias attempted to interfere in the investigation by pressing Mr. Macdonald to drop the complaint. It also cited Mr. Macdonald as saying that Mr. Doherty had also tried to pressure him. Mr. Macdonald, who said he was suffering from “debilitating anxiety” at the time, later withdrew the accusation against Mr. Doherty.

“Did I try to get hold of him? Yeah, I did, but he didn’t return my calls so that was it.” Mr. Dias said.

The report also talked about a culture of fear under Mr. Dias's leadership. "I never heard anything so ridiculous," he said. "I bet there has been more people fired, raw talent fired from Unifor in the last year than in the previous nine."

In December, Toronto Police closed the investigation without laying charges. Mr. Dias said Ms. Payne did not disclose that to the national executive until one of the board members asked in January.

The police's conclusions led to negotiations between Mr. Dias and Unifor to settle the dispute about whether he had violated the union's code of conduct. Neither side will discuss the settlement.

"That is all gone. Look I was not at my best. I will acknowledge that for sure, but I am not that person. I didn't take a dime. There was no deal with some supplier. That was all nonsense," Mr. Dias said.

Ms. Payne said in the statement that Mr. Dias could have participated in the investigation but declined to do so and he did not appear before the National Executive Board to answer the charges.

"As of April, 2023 Mr. Dias is no longer a member of Unifor," Ms. Payne said. "As a result, he is no longer subject to the Unifor constitution, including the code of ethics, and the National Executive Board can no longer proceed to hold a hearing into the charges against him."

Mr. Dias says he is proud of his record as president. Among his many achievements he cites the 2020 reopening of General Motors in Oshawa, negotiations to bring in \$6-billion of investments into the auto industry and his role in the renegotiation of the North American free trade deal.

He complains Unifor leadership have erased mention of his accomplishments and vows to continue to fight to restore his reputation among rank-and-file workers.

“You won’t find a picture of me. You won’t find any sort of an acknowledgment that we opened General Motors in Oshawa. There is no acknowledgment about NAFTA,” he said.

“I am not going away quietly. I am not going to be defined by someone else’s narrative.”