Canada boosts Kiev regime with free trade pact

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with his Ukrainian counterpart Arseniy Yatsenyuk in Chelsea, Quebec on Tuesday to announce the conclusion of a free trade pact between the two countries.

The deal will see the elimination of the vast majority of tariffs on the country's bi-lateral trade, including foodstuffs, manufactures, and wood and forestry items.

While Canadian big business will undoubtedly profit from greater access to Ukraine, a country with plentiful resources and an impoverished, skilled workforce, the agreement is not expected to lead to rapid trade growth in either real or percentage terms. Currently annual bilateral trade between Canada and Ukraine is worth less than $300 million. According to Ottawa, the agreement will boost Canadian exports by $41.2 million and Ukraine's by $23.7.

The agreement is aimed above all at demonstrating Canada's staunch support for the Kiev regime, which was brought to power in a pro-western coup spearheaded by fascist forces in February 2014. Canada's Conservative government has extended its full backing to the US-led strategic drive against Russia, which has involved NATO warplanes, ships and troops being deployed throughout Eastern Europe and in the Baltic and Black Seas. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been one of the most vocal international leaders demanding the isolation of Moscow, repeatedly joining with US President Obama in demanding European governments impose harsher sanctions on Russia.

Harper committed to concluding the long-running talks on the free trade deal during his visit to Kiev in early June. While in Ukraine, he confirmed plans to send Canadian police officers to the country to help strengthen Ukrainian law enforcement authorities. Canada is also deploying 200 Canadian Armed Forces' troops to the country next month to train Ukraine army and National Guard personnel at a base near the Polish border.

In addition to diplomatic, military and police support, the Harper government has extended $400 million in low-interest loans, and lent Kiev a total of $650 million.

Yatsenyuk is hoping for more. In comments to the *Globe and Mail* Tuesday, he appealed to Canadian investors to assist his government with a planned fire-sale of state assets. "I don't want Ukrainian tycoons to buy these state-owned enterprises," Ukraine's prime minister declared. "I asked the Canadian Prime Minister: 'Please tell your investors and your businesses to jump into Ukraine.'"

Ukraine's prime minister stressed that his government is determined to push through the privatization plan, which will result in the shutting down of large parts of state-owned industry and mass layoffs, over widespread popular opposition. The government "will never allow anyone to pull back from our reform agenda," he told CTV. This agenda has been worked out in close collaboration with the major imperialist powers and the International Monetary Fund, which extended Kiev a $17.5 billion loan in February.

Yatsenyuk came to Canada fresh from attending an investors' conference in the US held under the title "US-Ukrainian Business Forum: Choices for Growth."

While Canadian media reports invariably explain the Harper government's implication in Ukraine as being motivated by its interest in courting favour with the large Ukrainian-Canadian community, Canada's pro-Kiev stance is part of its close political and military alliance with US imperialism. Ottawa is a partner in all of Washington's major military-strategic offensives around the globe, including in Eastern Europe, the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East.

Further information revealing Ottawa's major role in Ukraine was made public just a day prior to Yatsenyuk's visit, when it emerged that violent, anti-government protesters were sheltered by the Canadian embassy in February 2014 just before Ukraine's elected president,

Victor Yanukovych, was driven from office. According to the Canadian Press, a group of Maidan Square demonstrators was allowed access to the building on 18 February 2014, just four days before Yanukovych's ouster.

Security guards allegedly responded to one protester who waved a Canadian passport at them while being chased by Ukrainian police. When the embassy door was opened, multiple demonstrators armed with sticks and paving stones rushed inside.

Roman Waschuk, the Canadian ambassador, admitted in an interview that the protesters remained camped in the lobby for at least a week. In response, a criminal investigation into the protesters' actions was launched by the Ukrainian authorities, but this was quietly dropped after Yanukovych was driven from power. One anonymous interior ministry official commented, "There wasn't much of an obstacle for them to get in. Not much security. Canada was sympathizing with the protesters at the time."

The Canadian Press article also notes that "a decision was made at the highest levels to let it play out," that is to not take any steps to evict the protesters, who had been participating in confrontations led by ultra-right-wing nationalists aligned with Svoboda and the fascistic Right Sector.

If the Harper government failed to make this incident public at the time or since, it is because it is determined to cover up the extent of Ottawa's involvement in Ukraine affairs, including in supporting the February 2014 coup.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Canada together with the US provided millions in aid to pro-western groups in Ukraine, including backing the Orange Revolution in 2004. The free trade agreement concluded between Harper and Yatsenyuk was first initiated by Canada in 2009 under the presidency of Victor Yushchenko, the co-leader of the 2004 uprising with the oligarch Yulia Timoshenko. But it was stalled in 2010 by the return to power of Yanukovych, who pursued closer relations with Moscow.

Ottawa enjoys close ties with many of the right-wing, nationalist forces which were active in the Maidan protests and are now playing a leading role in fighting against pro-Russian separatists in the country's east. These relations have been developed through the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), a lobby group claiming to represent the estimated 1.2 million people in Canada who are of Ukrainian origin.

The UCC has established a fundraising organization named Army SOS to ship military supplies, including weapons parts, to the Ukrainian Army and allied ultra-nationalist volunteer battalions. UCC representatives have travelled to Ukraine to oversee the supply of shipments to the front lines, and some even accompanied Harper on his last Kiev visit.

The Conservative government, with the full support of the opposition parties in parliament, has no problem in working with such right-wing forces.

According to a separate Canadian Press investigation, the Canadian government is making available $49 million "to fight Kremlin influence with grassroots ideology rather than tanks, artillery and troops." This includes $3 million to fund "journalists," a program involving the Canadian Federation of Municipalities to train administrative authorities, and support for anti-Russian political parties and civil society groups. Other groups participating in Canada's work with Ukrainian political parties are the US-based International Republican Institute, which has ties to the Republican Party, Poland's Solidarity Fund and the European Endowment for Democracy.

It is not hard to imagine the kinds of newspapers and other propaganda organs benefiting from this financial aid. Reporters Without Borders pointed out last August that Ukraine had enforced "draconian" restrictions on press freedom, passing a draft law which permitted the National Security and Defence Council to censor information in the name of security and national interests and do so without any judicial oversight. The prospect of a media publishing only what the right-wing government in Kiev wants to hear did not trouble Canada's ambassador in Kiev. "In any country that's in a state of conflict, in this case a victim of aggression, you are going to have judgement calls that come up on press freedom," said Waschuk.