Canadian ruling elite whips up anti-refugee hysteria to shift politics sharply right

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Canada's ruling elite is whipping up anti-refugee xenophobia with the twin aims of turning politics sharply to the right and diverting attention away from its agenda of austerity and war.

While the Conservatives are leading the way with appeals to far-right and outright racist forces, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government is presiding over the deportation of desperate asylum-seekers and working closely with the Trump administration to strengthen security at the Canada-US border.

The most right-wing section of the Canadian elite, emboldened by the coming to power of Donald Trump in the US, is portraying Canada as under siege by "illegal aliens." This chauvinist campaign has escalated in recent weeks with Ontario's new provincial government, led by the right-wing populist Doug Ford, ending cooperation with the federal government on a program that provides minimal support to asylum-seekers who have fled the United States for Canada out of fear of persecution and deportation.

In a thoroughly cynical manner, Ford and his spokesmen, who lead a government hell bent on eviscerating what little remains of Ontario's public and social services, claim that refugees are a drain on social spending. Employing the language of Trump or the far-right in Europe, Ford has argued that the influx of refugees is causing a "housing crisis" and jeopardizes Ontarians' access to public services.

Ford's anti-refugee xenophobia must be taken as a serious warning by working people across Canada. His goal is to mobilize the most backward sections of the middle class and sow divisions among working people as he imposes a hard-right agenda of social spending cuts, tax cuts for big business and the rich, and law-and-order measures.

Ford's rise parallels the strengthening of far-right political forces internationally, including Trump in the US, the Alternative for Germany, France's National Rally and Italy's *Lega* —all of which scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis produced by capitalism. These reactionary forces are being cultivated and systematically promoted by important sections of the ruling elite which view them as a battering ram to be used against the working class.

Workers disgusted by Ford's program of vicious attacks on the working class and anti-immigrant xenophobia must recognize that their ostensible establishment opponents, the Liberals and social-democratic NDP, represent no alternative. Like their counterparts internationally, the so-called "progressive" parties and the pro-capitalist trade unions have created the conditions for the rise of far-right figures like Ford and Trump, by their decades-long imposition of capitalist austerity and embrace of war and reaction.

While posturing as a friend of refugees, the Trudeau government has deported thousands of desperate asylum-seekers trying to flee Trump's vicious crackdown on immigrants. In fact, as Trump has been carrying out his anti-immigrant witch hunt, the Liberal government has expanded its border-military cooperation with the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Customs and Border Protection Agency—the very same bodies overseeing the mass round-up of immigrants south of the border.

The Liberals' "pro-refugee" posturing, which is abetted by the media, serves to obscure the fact that this big business party maintains a hard line against refugees and is eager to expand military-security cooperation with a Trump-led US.

According to data provided to Reuters by Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board, the Trudeau government granted refugee status to just 53 percent of all claimants in 2017. For so-called "irregular entrants," i.e. those entering Canada from the US, the rejection rate is far higher. Of the thousands of Haitians who came to Canada last year when Trump ended their "Temporary Protected" status, only 9 percent received the right to remain.

Moreover, Trudeau's Liberals defend the 2004 Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States to the hilt. It is this reactionary deal that forces significant numbers of refugees to cross the US-Canada border outside official entry points, often in life-threatening conditions.

The Safe Third Country Agreement deprives asylum-seekers who enter Canada from the US at a land-crossing of the right to make a claim for refugee status in Canada and sanctions their immediate return to the US. However, under international law, Canada is obliged to hear the claims of those who arrive outside official entry points.

The Conservatives are urging the Trudeau government to declare the entire Canada-US border an official entry point, so as to dramatically expand the application of the Safe Third

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Country Agreement and ensure the immediate arrest and deportation of all those fleeing the anti-immigrant witch hunt south of the border. Thus far the Liberals have insisted that this is not necessary, because under Canada's reactionary immigration laws the vast majority of asylum-seekers will soon be expelled anyway.

The Liberals reject the claims promoted by the Conservatives, the *Toronto Sun*, the *Journal de Montreal*, and other right wing media that the spike in refugee claimants constitutes a "crisis." But this is entirely hypocritical.

Because they want to discourage refugee claims, the federal Liberals are doing everything to ensure that those who cross into Canada face difficult, crisis-type, conditions, including at one point housing large numbers in tents just inside the border.

In their 2018 budget, the Liberals set aside $173.2 million over two years to strengthen border security. The government boasted that part of this money is to be earmarked for "expediting" the removal of those whose claims for asylum have been rejected on the spurious grounds they are "economic," not political, refugees.

To manage an enhanced crackdown on asylum-seekers, Trudeau announced last month the appointment of former Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair to a newly-created post of Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime.

The Liberals' pro-refugee posturing is all the more hypocritical given that the Trudeau government and Canadian imperialism bear responsibility for creating the conditions that have led tens of millions worldwide to flee their homes. Like its Liberal and Conservative predecessors, the Trudeau Liberals have ruthlessly pursued Canadian imperialist interests in US-led wars around the world that have destroyed entire societies. This has included deploying troops to the war in Syria and Iraq, dispatching military forces to Mali, and supplying weapons to the Saudi regime to wage its near-genocidal war in Yemen.

As tensions between the US and Canada have flared up over trade, which is but one expression of a broader breakdown of the global capitalist order, the Liberals have rushed to bang the drum of Canadian nationalism and impose multi-billion counter-tariffs on Washington. The nationalist narrative underpinning such policies plays directly into the hands of the extreme right.

The trade union bureaucracy plays a critical role in sustaining this foul political atmosphere with its promotion of virulent Canadian nationalism, including by means of its support for the Canadian government's protectionist tariffs and its denunciations of foreign workers, particularly in Mexico and Asia, as competitors of Canadian workers. Similarly, the New Democratic Party, which recently raised the demand for the formation of a corporatist national tariff task force to defend "Canadian jobs," is fully on board with peddling this nationalist filth.

The Parti Québécois and the pro-sovereignty movement in Quebec have long stoked xenophobic sentiments, presenting immigrants as a threat to "Quebec values," and seeking to divide workers along ethnic and linguistic lines. Like Ford, PQ leader Jean-François Lisée has suggested that refugees are responsible for deteriorating public services, and he has called for a Trump-style fence to block the principal road whereby refuge claimants are crossing over from the US into Quebec. For its part, the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) is demanding a reduction in immigrants and advocates that future immigrants to Quebec who fail a French-language and "Quebec values" test be expelled.

The promotion of such reactionary nostrums by the ruling elite is laying the groundwork for a deepening of the assault on the democratic and social rights of the working class—an assault which can be enforced only by a resort to openly authoritarian forms of rule. In this context, it is no accident that as in Europe and the United States, ultra-right groups such as *La Meute* in Quebec or Storm Alliance, active across Canada, feel emboldened. Over the past two years, they have organized protests and other provocations in major cities, often with direct police support.

Workers cannot oppose these dangerous developments by allying themselves with any section of the ruling elite. All are complicit in the attacks on jobs and living standards of working people and the criminalization of strikes and social opposition. The defence of refugees and immigrants must be a rallying point for a broader counteroffensive against the ruling-class agenda of war abroad, and attacks on democratic and social rights at home that is shared by the entire political establishment, from the NDP to the Conservatives. To prosecute such a struggle, workers require their own independent political party opposed to the capitalist profit system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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