Corporate Canada clamours for Trudeau to launch a violent crackdown on anti-pipeline protests

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Canada's business elite and the corporate media are clamouring for the federal Liberal government to authorize a violent police crackdown on anti-pipeline protests that have spread across the country this week.

The protests, which include blockades of railway lines in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, and ports on Canada's east and west coasts, were prompted by the RCMP's violent dispersal, beginning last Thursday, of longstanding road blockades in northern BC organized by the Wet'suwet'en indigenous people. The roadblocks were designed to prevent construction of the Coastal Gas Link pipeline from northeastern British Columbia to Kitimat, a Pacific Coast port.

The roadblocks were set up by hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en, who claim authority over 22,000 square kilometres of traditional Wet'suwet'en territory, including lands that will be traversed by the pipeline. The federal Liberal and BC New Democratic Party (NDP) governments have justified their dismissal of the objections of the hereditary chiefs and their supporters by pointing to the agreements that the 20 Canadian government-established elected Wet'suwet'en band councils have signed with TCE Energy, the company constructing the pipeline, approving the pipeline project in return for economic benefits.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers arrested over a dozen Wet'suwet'en activists and their supporters and dismantled their camps as part of their enforcement of a court injunction obtained by the company. The police operation was backed to the hilt by the provincial NDP government, which sees the pipeline as critical to a proposed $40 billion project to build a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal in Kitimat to ship LNG to markets in Asia.

Canada's ruling elite views the development and expansion of energy pipelines as essential to realizing its ambitions for Canada to become an "energy superpower." This is why the brutal treatment of Wet'suwet'en protesters, who have been harassed by the RCMP for over a decade, enjoys its full-throated support.

By contrast, the images of police officers armed with assault rifles suppressing peaceful protesters has triggered outrage across the country. Tyendinaga Mohawk activists have blocked a section of railway near Belleville in southern Ontario, and Kahnawake Mohawks have taken similar action south of Montreal, Quebec. In BC, chiefs of the Gitxsan First Nation have launched a blockade of the railway into the port of Prince Rupert. Injunctions against the railway blockades have been obtained, but police, fearing an escalation of the protest movement, have yet to enforce them.

The railway blockades established in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en are largely being manned by indigenous people. But other protests have been led or joined by others angered by the state crackdown and concerned about the impact of increased oil and natural gas extraction and pipelines on climate change. On Monday 43 people were arrested when police broke up a blockade at the Port of Vancouver, Canada's largest.

On Wednesday, BC NDP Premier John Horgan launched into a tirade against protesters who had blocked access to the provincial legislature in Victoria on Tuesday, temporarily disrupting the presentation of the government's Throne Speech. Horgan termed the protest "unacceptable" and said his government now has a plan to ensure it would not be repeated.

"Peaceful demonstration," declared Horgan, "is fundamental to our success as a democracy. But to have a group of people say to others, 'you are illegitimate, you are not allowed in here, you are somehow a sellout to the values of Canadians,' is just plain wrong."

In justifying his support for the police action against the Wet'suwet'en protesters, the NDP premier cynically invoked the poverty, squalor and economic backwardness to which Canadian capitalism has condemned the vast majority of the Native population.

"There's 204 Indian Act nations in British Columbia," said Horgan. "The vast majority … are anxious to have the prosperity that other British Columbians have experienced over the last 150 years. That overwhelming majority is my focus."

Exemplifying the unanimous hostility towards the protests among ruling circles, Horgan's remarks were essentially no different from those of federal Conservative leadership candidate Erin O'Toole. He railed against "people with a

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hashtag of ‘Shutdown Canada’ and signs calling the RCMP ‘apartheid,’ ” and those “who feel that they can take protests to a stage of actually stopping people from working, stopping court orders. That's very disruptive.”

In a shrill warning to the Trudeau government, Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty described the anti-pipeline protests as “an emergency for the Canadian economy” that “is damaging our international reputation as a reliable supplier. It is affecting our supply chains around the world." He has been joined by various industry representatives in decrying delays in shipments of consumer goods, grain, coal, lumber, aluminum, propane, and construction materials.

Yesterday afternoon, CN Rail CEO J.J. Ruest announced that Canada’s largest railway is shutting down virtually its entire network east of Toronto, suspending both freight and Via Rail passenger service. "With over 400 trains cancelled during the last week and new protests that emerged at strategic locations on our mainline, we have decided that a progressive shutdown of our Eastern Canadian operations is the responsible approach,” Ruest said in a written statement.

The corporate media’s response to the protests has become increasingly frantic. The *National Post* raged that Canada is being turned into a “mob city,” while the *Edmonton Journal* declared, “Chaos has come to Canada.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has responded by talking out of both sides of his mouth. While urging “dialogue” with the protesters to resolve the stand-off, he also invoked the iron fist of the “rule of law” to threaten the ruthless dispersal of protests if this strategy fails.

Trudeau has proposed that Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett attend a meeting with BC’s Indigenous Relations Minister Scott Fraser and the Wet’suwet’en and Gitxsan chiefs involved in the blockades to discuss an agreement to end the protests.

The offers to negotiate are in keeping with the Liberals’ phony “reconciliation” policy towards Canada’s indigenous peoples.

“Reconciliation” was initially welcomed by wide sections of the population, Native and non-Native, who viewed it as an attempt to address the injustices visited on the Native peoples as a result of their dispossession and oppression at the hands of Canadian capitalism and its state. In reality, it is aimed at cultivating a thin layer of wealthy Native politicians and businessmen whom the Canadian bourgeoisie can use to provide “consent” for various resource extraction projects, control the increasingly restive Native population, and, through Native identity politics, divide it from the rest of the working class.

Far from seeking to overcome the endemic poverty and misery that is experienced on a daily basis by most Native people on and off reserves, the Liberals and the substantial section of the ruling elite that backs their policy aim to “reconcile” indigenous people to the Canadian state and capitalist exploitation.

However, should negotiations fail, the Liberals have made it more than clear that they are ready to order a ruthless crackdown on protesters. Four years ago, then Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr told a business event in Alberta that the Trudeau government was ready to deploy the military against “non-peaceful” anti-pipeline protesters to ensure such projects are completed. Given the vast array of anti-democratic measures that have been passed over the last two decades in the name of the “war on terror,” virtually any protest can be deemed “non-peaceful,” especially protests deemed to endanger “economic or national security.” (See: Canada’s Liberal government stands by plan to use military against pipeline protests)

The RCMP is also more than ready to use lethal force to terrorize protesters, as a recent exposé by the British *Guardian* newspaper revealed. (See: Royal Canadian Mounted Police advocated use of live fire against indigenous pipeline protesters)

Trudeau’s pledge to uphold “the rule of law” must be taken as a serious warning by the entire working class. Just last week, Saskatchewan’s right-wing Premier Scott Moe cited the need to defend the “rule of law” as he ordered a vicious police assault against locked out Federated Cooperatives Ltd. refinery workers resisting sweeping concession demands.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford has repeatedly threatened to pass legislation to criminalize job actions by close to 200,000 teachers who are opposing his savage cuts to public education. Last week, an editorial in the right-wing *National Post* urged the Ontario provincial government to legislate a permanent ban on teacher strikes.

Governments across Canada of all political stripes routinely outlaw strikes, including in recent years, by teachers, railway workers, Quebec construction workers, and university staff. This has ensured that in Canada the “rule of law” amounts to a virtual ban on working class strikes. The violent suppression of the ongoing anti-pipeline protests on the same grounds would set a dangerous precedent for the use of all-out state violence against any section of workers struggling against capitalist austerity and exploitation.

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