

Canada: Native protests continue to cripple rail network

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Indigenous protesters and their supporters are continuing to blockade several major railway lines to voice their support for members of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation who are opposing the federal Liberal and British Columbia (BC) New Democratic Party (NDP)-backed Coastal Gas Link pipeline project.

Cross-Canada protests erupted after heavily armed police dismantled a barricade blocking access to the Coastal Gas Link (CGL) worksite in northern BC and arrested some two dozen Wet'suwet'en protesters on Feb. 6.

Publicly the Trudeau Liberal government remains committed to resolving the dispute through “dialogue.” But big-business lobby groups, many provincial governments, and much of the corporate media are demanding the government ensure speedy resumption of full rail service and “uphold the rule of law”—i.e. order police to violently intervene to dismantle the barricades.

While protesters have agreed to take some railway blockades down, several key railway lines in Ontario and Quebec remained blocked. Last Thursday, CN Rail, the country's largest railway, said that the blockades gave it no choice but to shut down its operations east of Toronto. Via Rail, the federal government-owned passenger service, has suspended most of its operations nationwide. Some commuter rail traffic has also been disrupted in both Greater Montreal and Toronto.

The hereditary Wet'suwet'en chiefs have led a years-long campaign to halt construction of the Coastal Gas Link pipeline along the current proposed route, which traverses ecologically pristine and culturally significant traditional Wet'suwet'en territory.

The pipeline, which will bring natural gas from northeastern BC to the Pacific Coast port of Kitimat, is critical to a \$40 billion project to build a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant that would export LNG to Asian markets. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has previously boasted that the Kitimat LNG project will be the largest ever single investment in Canada.

The federal Liberal and BC NDP governments have dismissed the opposition to the pipeline from the hereditary chiefs and their Wet'suwet'en supporters, by pointing to agreements CGL signed with 20 government-authorized elected band councils.

Yesterday afternoon, a spokesperson for Trudeau confirmed that the Prime Minister had been in consultation with cabinet

colleagues throughout the weekend over the rail shutdown. Those named included Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, Transport Minister Mark Garneau, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair, Indigenous Services Minister Mark Miller, and Minister for Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett.

Miller reportedly briefed Trudeau on the eight hours of talks he held Saturday with representatives of the Mohawk activists, whose blockade near Belleville, Ontario, on CN's Montreal to Toronto line, has choked the railway's operations.

Miller told reporters that “modest progress” had been made in the talks but refused to divulge any details. In comments Sunday, he added that a negotiated settlement was preferable to police moving precipitously to enforce court injunctions declaring the blockades illegal and risking a repetition of the 1995 Ipperwash clash. On September 6, 1995, Ontario Provincial Police stormed a native blockade and killed an indigenous protester, Dudley George, in Ipperwash Provincial Park. The deadly confrontation occurred after Ontario Tory Premier Mike Harris—eager to demonstrate that his hard-right government would not bow to public opposition—demanded police bring a quick end to a stand-off triggered by the Crown's refusal to return land to the Stony Point Ojibway First Nation that had been seized during World War II for a military base.

Miller's meeting with the Mohawk protesters came a day after Trudeau combined a call for “dialogue” with a veiled threat of state violence. In comments from Germany, where he was attending the Munich Security Conference, Trudeau asserted, “We are a country that recognizes the right to protest, but we are a country of the rule of law. And we will ensure that everything is done to resolve this through dialogue and constructive outcomes.”

Trudeau also attacked Conservative leader Andrew Scheer for demanding he instruct Public Safety Minister and former Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair to order police to dismantle the blockades.

Scheer's tirade, including his declaration that protesters should “check their privilege,” was denounced, even by sections of the media, as inflammatory. “These protesters, these activists,” said the Conservative leader, “may have the luxury of spending days at a time at a blockade, but they need to check

their privilege. They need to...let people whose jobs depend on the railway system, small businesses and farmers do their jobs.”

Using Scheer as a foil, Trudeau sought to strike a more conciliatory tone. “We are not the kind of country where politicians get to tell the police what to do in operational matters,” declared the prime minister.

Nobody should take Trudeau’s posturing seriously. The reality is that Trudeau’s repeated invocations of “the rule of law” are a signal that if negotiations fail, his government stands ready to use the full force of the repressive state apparatus to put an end to the protests. In 2016, Trudeau’s then Natural Resources minister, Jim Carr, told business leaders behind closed doors that the government had plans in hand to deploy the army against “unlawful” anti-pipeline protests.

Governments of all political stripes across Canada have increasingly moved to criminalize social opposition, including by routinely illegalizing strikes. Just two weeks ago, Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe ordered police to violently break up a blockade set up by locked-out FDL oil refinery workers in Regina, under the pretext of upholding the “rule of law.”

Anyone still harbouring illusions about the intentions of the Trudeau government and Canada’s ruling elite more broadly should examine the secret “agreements” CGL has struck with the government’s Wet’suwet’en band councils. They contain a legal commitment that the bands will “take all reasonable actions” to dissuade their members from doing anything that could “impede, hinder, frustrate, delay, stop or interfere with the project, the project’s contractors, any authorizations or any approval process.” This includes a commitment to dissuade band members from taking part “in any media or social media campaign.” In other words, the band councils have signed on to serve as a political police force on behalf of corporate Canada and the Trudeau government.

Trudeau’s sanctimonious blather about Canada not being “the kind of country where politicians get to tell the police what to do in operational matters” is equally dishonest. It was his Liberal government that rammed legislation (Bill C-59) through parliament, granting Canada’s premier spy agency the right to “actively disrupt” “threats” to Canada’s “economic or national security.” Moreover, the catch-all definition of “terrorism” fashioned under the battery of security laws passed by successive Liberal and Conservative governments since 2001 is so broad it could be applied to rail blockades and political strikes.

With increasing impatience, important sections of the ruling elite are demanding the Liberal government break up the blockades. In addition to Scheer’s call for a police crackdown, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney described the protests as “a very serious threat to the Canadian economy” on Friday. “Canadians are losing patience,” he fumed.

In an opinion piece for Global News, Rob Breakenridge raised the spectre of the 1970 FLQ crisis, when then Prime

Minister Pierre Trudeau, Justin Trudeau’s father, invoked the War Measures Act to suspend civil liberties and deploy the army on the streets of Quebec on the spurious claim that two kidnappings by the Front de libération du Québec had created a state of “apprehended insurrection.” After urging Trudeau to “borrow a page from his father’s playbook and show resolve,” Breakenridge continued, “Canadians are looking for some leadership, some clarity, and some backbone. Say what you will about Pierre Trudeau, but he was capable of demonstrating those qualities.”

In an indication that the mounting frustration and anger within ruling circles could quickly turn against the Prime Minister himself, the right-wing *National Post* published an editorial Friday accusing Trudeau of being “nowhere” on the protests and calling on him to resign.

An Angus Reid poll found that 39 percent of Canadians support the blockades and other protests launched in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en protests. This is a substantial figure given the universal hostility towards the protests expressed by the political establishment and corporate-controlled media. According to a CBC report, protest supporters “tend to be younger women, as well as those on the lower side of the income scale and those on the left of the political spectrum.”

The support for the protests reflects growing disenchantment with the Trudeau government’s phony “native reconciliation” agenda. It aims to “reconcile” native people—who for centuries have been subject to abuse, violence, and neglect at the hands of Canada’s ruling elite—to capitalism, by cultivating a privileged petty-bourgeois native elite, who will give “social license” to corporate Canada’s resource extraction projects and use identity politics to separate native people from the rest of the working class.

The support for the protests is indicative of mounting popular anger over the terrible living conditions most indigenous people face, the ruling elite’s indifference to climate change, and its readiness to use state repression to impose unpopular policies and further swell its wealth.



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