

How Canada's unions and NDP paved way for bill enforcing return to work amid pandemic

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The Liberal government has introduced a bill that threatens workers who refuse to return to work amid the COVID-19 pandemic with huge fines and jail time. With Bill C-17, Canada's ruling elite is dramatically intensifying its reckless, premature back-to-work campaign, which jeopardizes workers' lives.

The proposed legislation would impoverish and criminalize workers who refuse to risk their health and that of their families for corporate profit and who use the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to stave off being starved back to work under unsafe conditions.

Presented to a special sitting of parliament Wednesday, Bill C-17 was drafted at the express demand of business, which has denounced the CERB as "overly generous" and a "disincentive" to work, although it provides just C\$2,000 per month for a maximum of four months.

Bill C-17 threatens those who spurn an employer request they return to work, "fail to resume self-employment," or "decline a reasonable job offer" when "reasonable to do so" with fines up to three times any CERB benefits that they "improperly" claimed.

It also makes it a crime punishable by fines and a six-month jail term to fraudulently obtain CERB benefits, including by misrepresenting one's income. But the legislation's definition of "fraud" is so all-encompassing that it could be used to jail workers and youth who refuse to work under unsafe conditions and continue to receive the CERB (see: "Canadian government threatens fines and jail time to force workers back to work").

The trade unions and New Democratic Party (NDP) have bleated their opposition to Bill C-17.

But if the minority Trudeau government now feels emboldened to take the whip to the working class, it is because the union bureaucrats and social-democrats have bolstered it at every turn since the pandemic erupted; suppressed the class struggle, including the burgeoning mass movement against Ontario's hard-right, Doug Ford-led Conservative government; and colluded with big business and governments across the country in "reopening" the economy, although none of the conditions set by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other experts have been met.

The immediate response of the unions to the greatest economic seizure of global capitalism since the Great Depression was to form what Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff has dubbed a "collaborative front" with Canada's

employers' organizations.

The CERB and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS)—makeshift programs that effectively place workers on temporary rations—were designed by the Liberal government working in close consultation with the CLC, the NDP, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and other business groups.

While Yussuff and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh publicly enthused over the Liberals' readiness to work with the opposition and unions in providing temporary relief to workers, they were deafeningly silent on the massive bailout provided to the financial oligarchy.

The Liberal government wasted a precious two months in mobilizing medical resources in response to the novel coronavirus. But, in an object demonstration of the government's true class priorities, Prime Minister Trudeau and Finance Minister Morneau organized almost overnight the funnelling of C\$650 billion from federal coffers, the Bank of Canada, and other state institutions into the financial markets and big banks in order to guarantee the fortunes of Canada's rich and super-rich.

Once the bailout had been successfully carried through behind the backs of the population, the ruling elite quickly transitioned to pushing for a speedy return to work and the resumption of corporate profit-making.

Again, the unions and NDP rushed to offer their support. This included suppressing protests among health care and other "essential workers" over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other unsafe working conditions. Even with workers dying from COVID-19 contracted on the job, the United Food and Commercial Workers ordered workers at Cargill's High River, Alberta, meatpacking plant to report for work, insisting any job action would be "illegal."

In early May, the CLC released a document cynically entitled "Health and safety conditions for reopening sectors of the economy." It trumpeted the role of federal and provincial state institutions in enforcing workplace safety at a time when the Ontario Labour Relations Board had not upheld even one of more than 200 COVID-19-related worker complaints.

Unifor, Canada's largest private sector union, worked hand-in-hand with management at the Detroit Three auto plants to ensure that production—stopped in March by independent worker job action at plants in Windsor, Ontario, and across North

America—was restarted as soon as possible. For its part, the Quebec Labour Federations lauded right-wing Premier Francois Legault’s reckless “reopening” as an “economic recovery plan.” This under conditions where Quebec was, and is, the center of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, and where Legault’s government has failed to provide even health care workers with the requisite PPE.

The unions’ prioritization of profit over human lives has also led them to enforce mass layoffs. At Air Canada, for example, management cited a drop in demand to justify the cutting of up to 22,800 jobs. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which had spent weeks tabling its own cost-cutting plans in the hopes of satisfying Air Canada management, has done nothing to mobilize opposition to this savage attack. Instead, CUPE has lectured its members that “surplus” cabin crew and market-dictated “demand” require job cuts (see: “Air Canada announces lay off of up to 22,800 workers”).

That the unions are intent on cementing a long-term corporatist partnership with big business was underscored by a May 11 article co-written by the CLC’s Yussuff and Canadian Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty. It called for the creation of a tripartite union-business-government “national task force” on the post-endemic economy. “We will enter recovery with substantial new public and private debt,” they wrote. “The reversal of decades of economic globalization and international supply chains will create challenges for a trading nation like ours. ... Canada requires a process to discuss these transformational changes and to avoid stakeholders going off in different directions.”

In other words, under conditions where Canadian imperialism is facing massive new domestic and international “challenges,” from soaring debt to trade war and surging global geopolitical tensions, the unions are offering to deepen their collaboration with the capitalist elite. And with the overriding aim of stopping “stakeholders going off in different directions”—i.e., preventing an explosion of working class opposition.

At the end of May, Jagmeet Singh and his NDP moved to consolidate the political arm of this anti-worker corporatist conspiracy. With the CLC’s support, the NDP once again gave the minority Liberal government the votes it needed to proceed with its agenda, voting for a Liberal motion to shut down regular sittings of parliament until September. In justifying this step, the CLC and NDP have pointed to a supposed commitment from Trudeau to press for all workers to have 10 days of paid sick leave per year. However, as could be expected, the provinces, under whose labour laws 90 percent of workers fall, have already declared mandatory paid sick leave a non-starter.

The Liberals’ shutting down of parliament with the support of the NDP and Greens has enabled the Conservatives to posture as defenders of “democracy.”

More importantly, it means that the government will be able to work out with big business free from virtually any public scrutiny the phasing out of the CERB and CEWS—programs that, as woefully inadequate as they are, have provided an economic lifeline for upwards of 8 million workers or more than 40 percent of the workforce.

Starting July 5, millions of workers will have exhausted their

16-week maximum entitlement to the CERB, and by mid-August most of those who have drawn CERB benefits will be in the same situation. To date, the Liberal government has given only the vaguest indication of a possible “extension” of the entitlement period—one, moreover, that will be tied, as the terms of Bill C-17 spell out, to an accelerated and punitive back-to-work campaign.

While the Liberals failed to get Bill C-17 through the House of Commons in a single day’s sitting this week, they are reportedly in backroom talks with the opposition about convening a special session of parliament as early as Monday to move ahead with it.

The NDP’s harsh rhetoric against C-17 is a cynical political ploy that will not stop them and their union allies from continuing their close collaboration with the Liberal government.

Singh knows the NDP’s parliamentary support for the bill is largely irrelevant, since the Liberals will almost certainly secure the necessary votes for its passage from either the Conservatives or the Bloc Quebecois. The Conservatives, as they themselves emphasized this week, have long been echoing business’s complaints about the CERB. They are merely demanding that in addition to using punitive measures to force workers back on the job amid the pandemic, the government resume regular sittings of the House of Commons so that they can use it to amplify their demand for a quick transition to austerity measures.

A key factor motivating the NDP politicians’ sudden recourse to oppositional rhetoric is the eruption of mass protests across Canada, triggered by the Minneapolis police’s murder of George Floyd and opposition to Canadian state violence and racism. Singh and the NDP are anxious to burnish their extremely tattered credentials as critics of the status quo, so as to prevent leftward-moving workers and young people breaking with establishment politics.

Workers and youth must reject this political trap. To fight for their interests, including the guaranteeing of safe working conditions amid the pandemic, they must form rank-and-file safety committees in all workplaces, independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses and the NDP. These committees should consult with medical experts to decide on appropriate safety measures, including the provision of personal protective equipment at employers’ expense, and have full control over the organization and pace of production. They should also fight for full pay for all who cannot safely perform their duties until the pandemic is contained or a vaccine is available, and full compensation for the unemployed.

These immediate demands can only be achieved in a head-on struggle with the capitalist system, which prioritizes corporate profit over human life. The provision of adequate financial assistance to all workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work and the securing of safe workplaces is inextricably bound up with the struggle for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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