

Canada's political establishment inject racist narrative into protests against police violence

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The mass protests against police violence across Canada triggered by the brutal murder of George Floyd have been further fuelled by a steady stream of reports exposing the ruthless use of force by Canadian cops.

Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi, two indigenous people, were shot and killed by police in New Brunswick within eight days earlier this month. On June 4, an officer fired on Moore, 26, while allegedly carrying out a “wellness check” on the mother of one, who suffered from mental health problems. On Friday, June 12, Levi, a 48-year-old father of three, died after being gunned down at a barbecue after police were called.

Protests triggered by these outrages compelled New Brunswick's right-wing government to abandon a proposal to extend sweeping emergency powers to the police. The legislation, justified on the pretext of the need to clarify police powers as the economy “reopens,” would have permitted officers to stop citizens and request identification for no reason, and allow the government to suspend provincial laws behind closed doors.

Thousands participated in protests against police brutality across the country again last weekend, including large demonstrations in the Greater Toronto Area. Several hundred people marched peacefully through downtown Toronto, while groups of demonstrators blocked roads in Vancouver. One week earlier, tens of thousands of overwhelmingly young people participated in major protests across the country, including rallies of at least 10,000 in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.

While the killing of Floyd and the brutality of the police in the US and Canada served as the catalyst for the protests, they reflect much broader discontent with the current social order. Deepening social inequality, mass unemployment and poverty, which have all been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the ruling elite's focus on protecting the wealth of the super-rich, have driven many protesters onto the streets. As one participant in a rally in Kitchener, Ontario, told the WSWs earlier this month, “This COVID thing is horrible. All my friends are out of work too. I'm totally pissed at all this racism, and I'm totally pissed at being unemployed. I'm totally pissed

about everything, if you want to know the truth.”

Under such explosive social and political conditions, powerful forces within the ruling elite are consciously intervening to divert the protests along reactionary racist lines. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh, and the corporate-controlled media are determined to ensure that the protests are confined into manageable channels and that they do not develop into a direct challenge to the capitalist profit system, which is the root cause of police brutality and racism.

In comments to a press conference late last week, Trudeau sought to blame the entire Canadian population for police violence, which he said arose out of “systemic racism.” “It is recognizing that the systems we have built over the past generations have not always treated people of racialized backgrounds, of Indigenous backgrounds fairly through the very construction of the systems that exist,” he claimed.

Singh, for his part, put the epidemic of police brutality down to “systemic racism at all levels” and called for “really clear policy changes to do something about it.” Matthew Green, a black businessman elected for the NDP for the first time in last year's federal election, accused the entire population of suffering from “racial amnesia ... as it relates to disproportionate impact of militarized policing on racialized communities.”

The political establishment's insistence that racism is the dominant issue in police violence is a desperate attempt to quarantine the mass protest movement from connecting the struggle against the police with opposition to the social crisis produced by capitalism. Racism undoubtedly thrives and is cultivated within the police, judiciary, and prison system, which are institutions tasked with defending the interests of Canadian capitalism. Black people in Toronto are 20 times more likely to be shot dead by the police than the rest of the population, according to the Ontario Commission for Human Rights. Indigenous people make up more than 30 percent of Canada's prison population, even though they compose just five percent of the total population.

However, these institutions of the capitalist state are not representative of the entire population, and certainly not of the

working class, which faces ruthless oppression and exploitation on a daily basis irrespective of race or ethnicity. The function of the police is to enforce this bourgeois “legality,” i.e., to defend private property and profit-making at the expense of the working class. Anyone who gets in the way of this will be targeted for police brutality, as the locked-out workers at the Federated Cooperatives Ltd. oil refinery in Regina know all too well. There, in February, the police, egged on by the right-wing provincial government, forcibly broke up peaceful picket lines to allow the employer to continue shipping oil to its customers as it sought to starve workers into accepting ruthless concessions.

Presenting the issue of police violence as a racial rather than a class question suits the political and business elite because it diverts attention away from the central responsibility borne by capitalism for all forms of state-backed violence and oppression.

This reality was starkly revealed by an article in the *Globe and Mail* last week detailing how sections of corporate Canada are enthusiastically embracing racist politics. “Over the past two weeks, many of Canada’s largest companies have made statements condemning racism after a wave of protests against police violence in the United States and Canada,” gushed the mouthpiece of Toronto’s financial elite. “A new organization called the Canadian Council of Business Leaders Against Anti-Black Systemic Racism, which was launched on Wednesday, aims to ensure corporations follow through on their statements and take active steps to support Black employees and the Black community more broadly. The group’s co-chairs include notables such as Victor Dodig, chief executive officer of Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Prem Watsa, CEO of Fairfax Financial Holdings Ltd., and Rola Dagher, CEO of Cisco Systems Canada.”

Bluntly laying out the class strategy of an important section of the bourgeoisie, which aims to coopt the protests against police violence to consolidate the ongoing exploitation of working people for capitalist private profit, the *Globe* wrote of the newly-established Council, “Its first move is getting CEOs of other major Canadian corporations to sign a pledge that says their organizations will help combat systemic racism. The council is holding a virtual event on July 20, where executives will be asked to outline what their organizations are doing to support the Black community and to promote Black employees to leadership positions.”

While Canada’s corporate boardrooms, with the support of Trudeau and Singh, are full of enthusiasm over the chance to deploy racist politics to cultivate a new layer of capitalist exploiters, this strategy has manifestly failed to produce any improvements for the vast majority of black and indigenous people. In fact, their conditions of life, like those of all workers, have gotten steadily worse over recent years.

In 2015, Trudeau presented with great fanfare a racially diverse, gender-balanced “progressive” cabinet, with the first-

ever indigenous justice minister and Sikh defence minister. Yet after almost five years of Liberal Party rule, rates of imprisonment among the Native population are up, and Canada has intensified its close collaboration with the Trump administration’s witchhunting of immigrants and refugees. Trudeau’s “diverse” government has been used as a “progressive” cover to enforce right-wing, anti-worker policies, such as the hiking of military spending by over 70 percent, and the further integration of Canada and its military into US intrigues and aggression around the world.

As the ruling elite prepares to deepen its assault on the working class, above all to pay for the \$650 billion bailout handed to the banks and financial markets during the coronavirus crisis, the Liberals and NDP hope that the promotion of racist politics can continue to provide them with a “progressive” cover. Recent months have seen these two parties, in close collaboration with the trade unions, place workers on rations in the form of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and cooperate in preparing the way for the premature reopening of the economy.

The NDP and its union allies have worked tirelessly to suppress protests among health care staff and other sections of workers over dangerous working conditions and the lack of personal protective equipment. One of the most notorious cases of this came when the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) opposed any job action by meatpacking workers on the grounds it would “not be legal,” even though there had been close to 1,000 coronavirus infections and three deaths related to an outbreak at the Cargill meat packing plant in High River, Alberta.

Workers and young people seeking to put an end to police brutality must decisively reject the racist narrative being promoted by the political establishment. Instead, their struggles must be guided by the understanding that police violence is an expression of the irreconcilability of class interests under capitalism. Putting an end to it is bound up with the working class constituting itself as the conscious leadership of a revolutionary struggle to put an end to capitalism, expropriate the oligarchy, and establish democratic control over the means of production under a workers’ government.



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