Why the rush to end the Canadian military's deployment in coronavirus-ravaged nursing homes?

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On the orders of the federal Liberal government and over the strenuous objections of Quebec Premier François Legault, Canada's armed forces have now withdrawn virtually all of the more than 1,500 military personnel deployed at coronavirus-ravaged nursing homes in Quebec and Ontario.

In response to urgent appeals from Legault and Ontario Premier Doug Ford, the Trudeau government agreed in April to send Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) troops—including much of its medical corps—to the two provinces' long-term care facilities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 28, 1,475 soldiers were deployed in 23 Quebec long-term care centres (CHSLDs), while another 285 soldiers were helping staff four Ontario residences and would soon be deployed to three more.

The soldiers were called in to fill a chronic shortage of staff in seniors' residences after decades of cuts to public services supported and implemented by all the establishment parties, from the Liberals and Conservatives to the NDP, Parti Quebecois and Legault's Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ). The staff shortages were exacerbated by catastrophic management of the pandemic and a lack of protective equipment that resulted in the infection of thousands of health care workers and more than a dozen deaths.

The deadly consequences of these policies can be seen in the high fatality rates among nursing home residents, who account for over 80 percent of Canada's more than 8,500 COVID-19 deaths. The disingenuous character of the Trudeau government's claim that the situation is now "under control" is shown by the fact that more than 1,100 residents remain infected with COVID-19 in nearly 220 of Quebec's CHSLDs, private seniors' residences and intermediate care facilities.

Legault had pleaded with Ottawa to keep up to a thousand CAF personnel deployed in Quebec nursing homes until mid-September, when the 10,000 or so new, hastily recruited and trained orderlies are supposed to be ready for service. But the Liberal government, egged on by the CAF top brass, insisted beginning in late May that the deployment needed to be rapidly wound up.

Trudeau intoned that military involvement "is not a long-term solution. ... It is a preliminary measure, and we need to see how we can take it to the next level so that Quebec can take direct control of the situation."

The reality is neither Trudeau nor Legault have prioritized protecting human lives. Their governments have overseen a ruinous, improvised response to a pandemic that was both foreseeable and foreseen. Even as the COVID-19 pandemic spread in February and early March, they did nothing to ensure adequate supplies of personal protective equipment and other critical medical supplies, like ventilators, or to develop mass-testing and contact-tracing capabilities.

The deployment of the military to Quebec's nursing homes was aimed at fostering the public impression that the pandemic was under control, so that Legault's CAQ government could press ahead with its homicidal back-to-work strategy. The forcing of hundreds of thousands of workers back into unsafe workplaces then followed with the full support of the Trudeau government and the trade unions, even as the province's death toll per head of population rose to one of the highest in the world.

The Trudeau government also viewed the deployment of CAF personnel to Ontario and Quebec long-term care facilities as a way to cultivate popular support for the military and thereby legitimize the rearmament and war plans of Canadian imperialism.

In now bringing this deployment to a quick end, Trudeau and his Liberals are responding to the demands of the military for a change of course, as well as the imperatives of the aggressive foreign policy they are pursuing on behalf of Canadian big business. Both the government and the CAF high command want soldiers to stop what they have derided off-the-record as "diaper-changing," so that they can be reassigned to their real mission: expanding Canada's participation in US-led military-strategic offensives around the world; and preparing to come to the support of civilian authorities in suppressing working class opposition at home.

In late May, barely a month after the military's deployment to care facilities had begun, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan declared, "We cannot hold out like this for another four

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months." He then went on to claim, "The resources of the Canadian Armed Forces are not unlimited."

From a purely technical point of view, such claims are preposterous. In March, the military claimed that some 24,000 regular and reserve personnel had been mobilized to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. If Canada's military is genuinely concerned about saving lives and strengthening the health care system, why does it consider the deployment of a thousand soldiers—i.e., a tiny fraction of the force that it had supposedly set aside to combat the virus—at Quebec nursing homes for an additional two-and-a-half months to be an intolerable burden?

The answer is that the underling purpose of the military mobilization is, and always has been, upholding the interests of Canadian imperialism, both at home and abroad.

Chief of Defence Staff Jonathan Vance announced in March that the 24,000 soldiers assigned to tackle COVID-19 were "on a war footing" and had to be "ready to fight." Retired Lieutenant-General Alain Parent added at the time that the soldiers assigned to the "anti-COVID-19" task force for the duration of the pandemic would not simply provide medical assistance. They would also be used in "surveillance, security and augmenting law and order."

The soldiers' withdrawal from the care homes will allow the military to redeploy CAF personnel to ongoing military missions around the world. While wars and war preparations in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and East Asia have continued throughout the pandemic, a number of Canadian soldiers were temporarily repatriated. Now, the Trudeau government intends to rapidly ratchet up these missions, while deepening Canada's military-strategic partnership with the Trump administration, which is recklessly stepping up aggression against China and Russia in order to deflect mass anger at home.

Current CAF foreign missions include:

• Deploying warships and aircraft to intimidate North Korea and to enforce heavy economic and diplomatic sanctions against that impoverished country,

• Redeploying hundreds of troops to Iraq as part of a Canadian-led NATO training mission, as well as dispatching Special Forces to the north of the country to assist the Kurdish Peshmerga in fighting Islamist forces,

• Returning 90 military trainers to Ukraine, soon to be followed by a second group of 50. There they will join the 60 CAF troops that remained in that country during the pandemic in a training mission that was launched in 2015 following a coup fomented by Washington, as part its drive to strategically encircle Russia,

• Leading a 1,000-strong NATO battalion in Latvia on Russia's Western border, which is part of a US-led military build-up in the Baltic States and Poland.

These missions are in pursuit of the new national defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), the Liberal government adopted in 2017. It defines China and Russia as major strategic "threats" to Canada and announced a 70 percent increase in military spending that will raise the defence budget to more than C$32 billion by 2026. Hundreds of billions of dollars are to be spent over the next 20 years on buying new fleets of fighter jets and warships and other weaponry. Earlier this month, the government included C$585 million in its latest coronavirus spending bill to pay for continuing work on the building of two naval support ships. The New Democrats (NDP), who have repeatedly backed the government's rearmament program, voted for the bill.

From Canada's ruling elite there is a growing clamour for a new volley of austerity measures to pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds the Trudeau government has funnelled into the coffers of the big banks and super-rich. Spending on the Canadian military, however, will continue to increase. Deputy Minister of National Defence Jody Thomas recently told the *Canadian Press*, "We are not experiencing any slowdowns. ...We are continuing very aggressively and ambitiously to continue our plan."

"In a post-COVID world," Thomas continued, "there is a need for SSE to in fact be done more quickly rather than slow it down or cut the budget."

Domestically, the ruling elite fears a social explosion due to the ever-deepening economic crisis, mass unemployment, and the growth of social inequality. The multi-racial mass protests that united workers and young people across the United States against police violence and racism in late May and early June are an initial expression of a global political radicalization. The immediate trigger for the demonstrations, which rapidly spread around the world and attracted tens of thousands of participants across Canada, was the brutal murder of George Floyd. However, they were driven more fundamentally by mounting anger at a social order that has nothing to offer workers and young people.

Under these conditions, the military is actively preparing to suppress mass opposition, or what General Vance euphemistically called "the worst-case scenario" when he outlined the objectives of the military's COVID-19 deployment in March.

Just four months ago, when Native protesters blocked railway lines across the country to oppose the construction of a pipeline on Wet'suwet'en land, a large faction of the Canadian ruling elite demanded that the military be deployed to break the blockades. Ultimately, the Trudeau government, with the support of the NDP, Greens and Bloc Quebecois, was able to reach a settlement with the protesters that involved police dismantling some blockades.

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