

Canadian PM Trudeau provides political cover for criminal back-to-work drive

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26 September 2020

The Liberal government's Sept. 23 Throne Speech and the "address to the nation" Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered that evening were aimed, above all, at providing political cover for the capitalist ruling elite's reckless back-to-work, back-to-school drive.

Behind cynical promises of "social justice" and "building back better," the Trudeau government made clear no matter how many people are infected or die from COVID-19, its principal concern is ensuring that nothing impedes corporate Canada's profit-making.

In his 15-minute address, Trudeau acknowledged Canada now finds itself in a "second wave" of the pandemic, with daily new infections averaging well over 1,000 per day for the past week and a half. "We're on the brink of a fall that could be much worse than the spring," Trudeau added, indicating that the ruling class expects the current death toll of 9,250 to rise dramatically.

The reality is that big business and the political establishment considers thousands more deaths to be the cost that must be paid to "revive the economy" and ensure that Canadian capitalism remains "competitive."

The Throne Speech stated explicitly that any shutdowns to check the virus' spread would be "short-term" and limited to the "local" level. In what amounted to an implicit threat to health care authorities not to be "overzealous" in fighting the pandemic, the government declared that "as members of the communities they protect," local health officials "know the devastating economic impact a lockdown order can have." Underscoring that the government is determined to restrict lockdowns to individual businesses or institutions where there are documented COVID-19 outbreaks, the speech pledged to "target additional financial support directly to businesses which have to temporarily shut down."

That the policy of letting the virus rip is endorsed by all levels of government was illustrated by a CBC report published the same day on the "Fall Pandemic Preparedness Plan" drafted by Ontario's hard-right Conservative government. The plan, which was leaked to the CBC, discussed three possible scenarios for the pandemic's second wave: small, medium or large. But in all three cases it stipulated that any public health response should be limited to "targeted action" at the local level: "The return to an earlier stage of provincial reopening, *or even regional approaches* to tightening would be avoided in favour of organization-specific or localized change." (Emphasis added)

In other words, even if the pandemic surges province-wide,

infecting tens of thousands, no serious measures will be taken to protect working people and their families from the deadly disease, so as to ensure that the process of extracting profit from the labour of working people can continue unimpeded.

Well aware that a frank annunciation of this "herd immunity" policy would trigger mass opposition, the Trudeau government sought to conceal it behind its customary "progressive" rhetoric. The government, the Throne Speech declared, would ensure a "feminist, intersectional response to this pandemic and recovery," and even consider taxing "extreme wealth inequality."

Who do Trudeau and his speech writers think they are kidding? The Liberal government has claimed to be carrying out a "feminist foreign policy" over the past three years, during which time it has initiated a more than 70 percent increase in military spending, ensured that more women are recruited into the army to fight wars on behalf of Canadian imperialism, and stepped up Canada's involvement in US-led military aggression around the world.

As for wealth inequality, the Liberals, supported by their trade union and New Democratic Party allies, organized an unprecedented transfer of public funds into the hands of big business and the banks at the beginning of the pandemic. In March, the Trudeau government, the Bank of Canada, and various other state agencies funnelled more than \$650 billion into bailing out the financial oligarchy, while laid-off workers were placed on rations of just \$2,000 per month under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The unions, led by the Canadian Labour Congress, helped the ruling class perpetrate this massive public heist by both trumpeting the government's meagre social assistance as an act of generosity and keeping silent about the vast funds being poured into bailing out the rich and super-rich.

As a result of this financial bonanza, Canada's richest 20 billionaires have seen their combined wealth shoot up by \$37 billion since the onset of the pandemic.

The Liberals now plan to transition the estimated 2.8 million workers still receiving the CERB to Employment Insurance and several new makeshift, time-limited assistance programs. This move, which the unions have praised to the skies, will subject workers to stepped-up pressure from the state to "actively seek" and return to work, even as the pandemic returns with a vengeance.

Several Liberal initiatives, lauded by the unions and a myriad of middle-class NGOs as "progressive victories," are, as closer inspection demonstrates, in reality aimed at boosting the

“competitive” position of Canadian capitalism. For example, the Throne Speech recycled a longstanding Liberal pledge to establish a national child care program. But this was presented not as an essential measure to alleviate the social crisis confronting families and offer children improved care in small groups with highly-trained and well-paid pedagogical experts, but as necessary to improve “women’s participation in the workforce.” In other words, working-class women will be encouraged to place their children in poorly-funded, overcrowded, privately-run government-subsidized child care facilities so that they can work for a pittance trying to make ends meet.

Even in the long-term care sector, where decades of austerity and privatization had such devastating consequences in the initial stage of the pandemic, resulting in the deaths of thousands of residents, the government proposed no fundamental changes. No additional funding was announced for the chronically underfunded publicly-run long-term care facilities, or any limits on the operations of private for-profit companies. All the government would commit to is drafting new “national standards” for long-term care in conjunction with the provinces. The only other measure promised in the speech was legislation providing for the criminal prosecution of those who “neglect seniors under their care.” Needless to say, this will not be applied retroactively to the politicians and corporate bosses who slashed funding for long-term health care and profited off housing seniors in barrack-style residences.

Along with emphasizing the government’s commitment to pressing forward with “reopening” the economy, the Throne Speech included a raft of policy commitments and measures tailored to the demands of big business.

These include promoting internal “free trade” by pressing for the removal of provincial regulatory barriers to the free movement of goods and services. This has been a longstanding demand of the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, who view such barriers as impediments to creating “globally competitive” Canadian companies and attracting more foreign investment.

The government also announced the extension of its corporate-designed wage subsidy program, which funds workers’ wages up to a maximum of \$873 per week, until next summer.

The speech stressed that government would “preserve Canada’s fiscal advantage”—that is lower debt levels than its G-7 rivals—and remain committed to fiscal “sustainability and prudence.” The pursuit of these “austerity” principles” by Liberal, Conservative, New Democrat and Parti Quebecois federal and provincial governments alike has devastated public services. Indeed, among the 37 member-states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Canada has one of the lowest rates of social spending as a percentage of GDP. The 17.3 percent of GDP allocated by Canada’s governments to social spending is lower than that of even the United States, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia

Many of the “economic recovery” initiatives promised in the Throne Speech were tied to the government’s plans, in the name of fighting climate change, to make Canada a leader in Green capitalism. The speech commits the government to creating 1 million jobs over the next year through building public

infrastructure, subsidizing the retrofitting of energy efficient homes and businesses and promoting Green enterprises. “Global consumers and investors are demanding and awarding climate action,” noted the speech, and Canada cannot afford to pass up this “global market opportunity.” To this end, the government will establish a new fund to attract investment in the production of “zero” carbon emissions products, slash the corporate tax rate in half for “clean technology” businesses and “ensure Canada is the most competitive jurisdiction in the world for clean technology companies.”

A central role in crafting this strategy to promote Green capitalism is being played by the trade unions, which were intimately involved in consultations with the government in the lead-up to the speech. In a series of corporatist meetings with leading representatives of big business and the government since April, union leaders like Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff and Unifor’s Jerry Dias have been advocating for “national strategies” on everything from auto manufacturing to battery production.

At the same time, these meetings were used to orchestrate the back-to-work drive, which has led directly to the current sharp increase in COVID-19 infections. In recent weeks, the unions have systematically suppressed working class opposition to the drive to reopen schools, which the Trudeau government and the ruling elite as a whole view as essential, as it “frees” the parents of school-age children to return to work.

Predictably, the unions have celebrated the Throne Speech. “The government is making it clear that it is listening to the concerns of workers and their families by recognizing that investments are the only way to get us through this pandemic,” gushed the CLC’s Yussuff. “It’s time to roll up our sleeves. We’re going to have to keep working closely with the government to ensure that they get the details on these programs and initiatives right.”

Earlier this month, Yussuff publicly declared that the NDP has an “obligation” to continue propping up the minority Liberal government in Parliament.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, who publicly appealed for the Liberals to accept the NDP as junior partners in a coalition government both before and after last October’s federal election, signaled Thursday that a backroom deal to secure NDP support for the Throne Speech has all but been secured.

For their part, both the Conservatives and Bloc Quebecois were quick to announce they would vote “non-confidence” in the government. The former attacked the government for failing to announce a plan to reduce Canada’s budget deficit in the coming years and ignoring the crisis facing the Alberta-based oil industry. The BQ accused the Liberals of intruding into provincial affairs and denounced them for rejecting the call of Quebec’s pro-austerity CAQ government for increased federal health care transfers.



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