

Trudeau names top military officer to lead Canada's COVID-19 vaccine rollout

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Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced last week that Maj.-Gen. Dany Fortin has been named to lead the large-scale distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in Canada. Fortin is the current chief of staff of the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), a unified command centre for army, air force, and navy operations that directs most Canadian Armed Forces' missions in Canada and around the world.

Fortin's new assignment attests to the growing role the military is playing in public life. It is part of the ongoing efforts of the trade union and New Democratic Party-supported Trudeau Liberal government to give the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) a "humane" façade, and this for two reasons: to cultivate a base of support for the CAF's role in advancing Canadian imperialist interests around the world through aggression and war, and to legitimize the military's increasing deployment at home to meet domestic "emergencies."

At the same time, the fact that public health authorities and social services are deemed incapable of leading a mass vaccination campaign is a damning indictment of the austerity policies all the political parties have pursued over the past three decades. Despite warnings of the threat posed by pandemics for well over a decade, nothing was done by the ruling class to prepare health and social services to counter it (see: "The 2003 SARS epidemic: how Canada's elite squandered the chance to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic").

Fortin has occupied a series of leadership positions in the course of his nearly 30-year military career as a loyal defender of Canadian imperialism's predatory interests around the globe. He was commander of the NATO training mission in Iraq in 2018–2019, and was the chief of staff of the CAF's Task Force Kandahar and Joint Task Force Afghanistan between 2009 and 2010. Fortin also led a platoon of the United Nations Protection Force in 1993–1994 during the Bosnian war that saw the partition of the former Yugoslavia along ethnic and religious lines.

As the vice president of logistics and operations for the newly created "National Operations Centre," Fortin is leading a team of about 30 CAF personnel that have been quietly working for months on the vaccine campaign. The National Operation Centre was created as a "hub" within the Public Health Agency of Canada and will play a key role in major public health

decisions.

The nomination of Fortin came only days after Ontario Premier Doug Ford picked former CAF head and leading Afghan War proponent Gen. Rick Hillier to lead that province's vaccine campaign. Ford justified his decision on the grounds that to immunize the population, "We need military precision. We need the discipline that only a general can bring to this task."

The Trudeau government has said the CAF will lead the planning and logistics for the vaccine distribution, including the cold storage requirements for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Other tasks the CAF will be asked to perform include "data-sharing," implementing "risk-mitigation tools," and conducting "a series of exercises" ahead of the vaccination rollout.

The federal and provincial governments' reliance on the military during the pandemic is an indictment of all the establishment parties of the ruling class, from the Liberals and Conservatives to the NDP, Parti Québécois and Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec, which have imposed decades of brutal social spending cuts, ravaging public services. Since coming to power in 2015, the Trudeau Liberals have picked up where the Harper Conservatives left off by imposing real-term reductions in the transfers made to the provinces to pay for health care. This criminal neglect has created conditions in which many of Canada's long-term care facilities have become killing fields during the pandemic. Last spring, provincial governments in Ontario and Quebec were forced to call in the military to deal with horrific conditions that were described by one observer as akin to a "concentration camp."

Even if one accepts the self-serving claims of Trudeau and Ford that only the military is capable of conducting such a large-scale operation, this begs the question as to why its resources cannot be placed at the disposal of civilian-led public health agencies at the federal and provincial levels, where many of Canada's leading experts on infectious diseases and vaccinations work.

The answer is that the ruling elite is not concerned primarily with saving lives and containing the pandemic, but at advancing the interests of Canadian imperialism. They hope that by granting the military such a prominent role in what Trudeau has dubbed the "greatest mobilization effort Canada

has seen since the Second World War,” they can boost popular acceptance of the armed forces and thus legitimize Canada’s rearmament and war plans under conditions of accelerating geopolitical tensions.

In its 2017 national defence policy document, the Trudeau government announced a 70 percent increase in military spending over the next 10 years so as to boost the CAF’s capabilities to uphold the US-led world order, including by playing an increasingly significant role in Washington’s military-strategic encirclement of nuclear-armed China and Russia.

Well aware that the pandemic is acting as an accelerant of inequalities and class tensions, the ruling class is also determined to expand the presence of the military in daily life so as to suppress working class opposition. At the beginning of the pandemic, the CAF committed 24,000 regular and reserve troops to its pandemic response mission, known as Operation Laser. Back in March, Chief of Defence Staff Jonathan Vance declared these soldiers were “on a war footing” and had to be ready for a potential “worst-case scenario,” which a CBC report described as widespread civil unrest. Retired Lieutenant-General Alain Parent added at the time that the soldiers would not simply provide medical support, but would assist in “surveillance, security and augmenting law and order.”

These were not idle threats. The military, with government support, immediately seized on the pandemic to implement long-planned surveillance projects.

A small unit associated with the troops deployed to the most hard-hit Ontario nursing homes, the Precision Intelligence Team (PIT), was secretly tasked with collecting intelligence on oppositional sentiment among the population on the dubious claim it would help the work in nursing homes. Through “data-mining” of social media posts, the team gathered information on posts critical of the Ford government’s failure to protect the elderly and turned it over to the government.

Then in August, the *Ottawa Citizen* revealed that in April, the CIOC developed and began implementing an “information operations” plan aimed at “shaping” public opinion and “exploiting information,” so as to deter civil unrest. This plan was explicitly based on the methods the CAF developed during its decade-long role in the US-led neo-colonial, counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan. Although that particular project was shut down by top military commanders, a series of similar propaganda and spying operations are either ongoing or in planning.

Despite all the bluster about the “greatest mobilization since the Second World War,” the reality is that the Canadian military will be overseeing a vaccine rollout that is fully subordinated to the giant pharmaceutical companies’ drive for a profit bonanza and thus totally inadequate.

Due to the fact that production and distribution of critical life-saving vaccines remain in private hands, the Public Health Agency has had to warn that at most 3 million Canadians (less

than 10 percent of the population) will receive the COVID-19 vaccine in the first three months of the rollout. This number is not even likely to cover all “high priority groups,” which have been designated as seniors in long-term care homes, people at risk of severe illness and death, first responders, health care workers, and some Indigenous communities. The Trudeau government has also had to acknowledge that vaccination in Canada will lag behind that in the US, the UK and Germany, and even poorer countries like Mexico, which is producing its own vaccine.

The COVID-19 vaccines are a tremendous scientific achievement that must be made freely available to every human being, but the capitalist profit system makes this an impossibility. To do so requires seizing the ill-gotten fortunes of the super-rich and transforming giant private enterprises, including the pharmaceutical and logistics giants like Pfizer and Amazon, into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities. Production facilities around the world must be requisitioned to produce enough doses of clinically approved vaccines to ensure swift access for working people in every country.

In the meantime, nonessential production must be shut down with full compensation for all workers so they do not have to choose between risking their lives and being left destitute. To fight for such a program, which the ruling elite rejects out of hand because it would cut into their bank balances and share portfolios, the working class must intervene independently into the health and social crisis with its own socialist and internationalist program to contain the pandemic and save lives.

Absent such a struggle, the capitalist class will exploit the vaccines to advance their own selfish class interests. For the Trudeau government, the propaganda campaign claiming that all resources are being mobilized to vaccinate the population as soon as possible is a vital component of its drive to keep the economy and schools open as new infections reach record highs. The goal of this homicidal strategy is to make workers pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars the Liberal government, with the full support of all the opposition parties, has funneled into the financial markets, the banks and corporate coffers, since the pandemic began, so as to guarantee the wealth and profits of the rich and super-rich.



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