

As far-right Ottawa occupation continues, Canadian authorities move to shred all anti-COVID measures

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The political crisis provoked by the far-right occupation of downtown Ottawa, including the streets immediately surrounding Parliament Hill, continues to escalate.

The far right and outright fascist supporters of the Freedom Convoy have occupied Ottawa for the past 13 days. They have been emboldened by the support they have received from the Conservative official opposition, much of the corporate media, and Donald Trump and his co-conspirators in the US. They are vowing to remain until all public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 are scrapped.

Canada's political establishment is bitterly divided over how to bring the occupation—whose leaders have openly called for the overthrow of the democratically-elected government and its replacement by a 90-day emergency junta—to an end.

The Conservatives continue to insist that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau should meet with the Convoy leaders, whom they falsely depict as representatives of “ordinary working Joes” and “patriotic, peace-loving Canadians.”

That the Conservatives are intent on leveraging the far-right occupation to bring down Trudeau's minority Liberal government was underscored by last week's internal party revolt. By a wide margin, Conservative MPs voted to remove Erin O'Toole, whom they deemed insufficiently supportive of the Convoy, as party leader. They then elected as his interim replacement Candice Bergen, who advocated in leaked emails that the party make the occupation “Trudeau's problem.”

The frontrunner to permanently succeed O'Toole, Pierre Poilievre, formally launched his leadership bid last Saturday with the release of a short video meant to both identify his candidacy with the Convoy and rally big business support by pledging to implement a massive assault on the working class. *A la* Trump, Poilievre vowed to make “Canadians the freest people on earth,” by slashing taxes, imposing massive austerity and eliminating all anti-COVID public health measures.

Trudeau, backed by the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), has spurned the Conservatives' call for his government to extend an “olive branch” to the far-right Convoy.

The Liberal government was clearly taken by surprise by the virulence of the Convoy; its extensive, well-funded support network, which stretches deep into the US far-right; and the sizeable contingent of well-armed participants now encamped in the country's capital. Its initial hope was that the Convoy would dissipate once most of its supporters departed Ottawa after running amuck, flouting anti-COVID regulations and attacking and intimidating workers and local residents,

during an extended three-day weekend (Jan. 28-30).

Some 10 days on, there is mounting pressure from the beleaguered residents of Ottawa, who have had to endure intimidation and violence, but more importantly from powerful sections of the capitalist ruling elite for the government to find a means to bring the occupation to a quick end.

Its mounting economic costs are one reason. The Convoy has disrupted and shut down much of daily life in Canada's capital. Moreover, a parallel protest has closed down the principal border crossing between Alberta and Montana for days, badly disrupting tens of millions of dollars' worth of Canada-US trade, including time-sensitive shipments of foodstuffs and animal feed.

For the past two days, the most important commercial link between Canada and the US, the Detroit-Windsor Ambassador Bridge, has been disrupted by pro-Convoy protests. In an interview with the *Windsor Star* Tuesday, Flavio Volpe, president of the Canadian Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association, warned that the protests could soon have a negative impact on automotive production in both Canada and the US, which is dependent on integrated North American production chains. “What we are looking for is the law to be enforced,” declared Volpe. “It's really that simple.”

A second factor fueling the demands of some sections of the ruling elite for urgent action to close down the Convoy is their concern and apprehension about its impact, given the brazenness of the Convoy's challenge to the government, on the authority of the state.

There are growing calls in the capitalist press for Trudeau to deploy the military. Yesterday, the *Globe and Mail* published two columns that argued military intervention may be the only way to end the Ottawa occupation. The first, by David Pratt, a former Liberal Defence Minister, outlined the legal basis for “military aid to civil power.”

The second, authored by liberal commentator Andrew Cohen and titled “The Ottawa occupation is the October Crisis revisited. Justin Trudeau must be bold,” argued that the current prime minister must be ready to emulate his father. In October 1970, Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act (WMA) and deployed the military in Quebec on the grounds that two *Front de Libération du Québec* (FLQ) kidnappings constituted an “apprehended insurrection.” In fact, the government used the WMA's authoritarian powers to mount a massive crackdown on the left, arresting and detaining without trial hundreds of leftists, socialists and militant trade unionists who had absolutely nothing to do with the kidnappings.

On Monday, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson sent a letter to the federal and Ontario governments calling for “a dramatic and immediate injection” of 1,800 additional police officers. He has also described the occupation as an “insurrection,” which would provide the legal basis for a military deployment.

Even as the dispute rages within the capitalist establishment over how to end the fascist-led Ottawa occupation, it is being used to shift Canadian politics far to the right.

This is most transparently seen in the rush to eliminate all that remains of the anti-COVID public health measures, the Convoy’s stated aim. These steps are being taken even as the Omicron variant continues to sweep across the country, causing record hospitalizations and inflicting death at rates equal to the highest peaks of previous waves.

Yesterday, one premier after another announced plans to quickly phase out all COVID mitigation measures. This was kicked off by Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe, the most forthright Convoy supporter among the provincial premiers.

Moe announced that his province would abandon proof of vaccination requirements for entry into retail stores and other public places next Monday. Mask mandates for indoor settings will also be done away with by the end of February.

Quebec Premier François Legault announced a further relaxation of limits on household gatherings and rules for indoor restaurant dining as of Saturday. He vowed that all remaining capacity restrictions for bars, indoor events, and casinos will be scrapped by March 14. Underscoring the ruling elite’s determination to be rid of any public health impediments to capitalist profit-making, Legault callously declared, “We will need to learn to live with the virus. There may be a sixth wave eventually, but we will have to live with COVID.”

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney was scheduled to hold a press conference Tuesday evening to outline a “path back to normal.”

The shredding of all public health restrictions amid another wave of mass death has been greenlighted by the Trudeau Liberal government. In comments last Friday, Canada’s Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Theresa Tam, a Trudeau government appointee, told the press that all COVID-19 measures would need to be “re-examined” in the coming weeks because “this virus is not going away.”

The sharp shift right is not limited to pandemic policy. The Trudeau government has indicated that it is preparing to bow to a campaign fronted by the Conservatives and backed by the corporate media for Canada to send lethal weapons to Ukraine and additional troops to Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, the NDP and trade unions have responded to the incitement of an extra-parliamentary movement by doubling down on their support for the Trudeau Liberal government, even as Trudeau makes one concession after another to the openly right-wing, pro-Convoy forces. The unions and NDP have vehemently opposed calls for counter-demonstrations against the far right and signalled their support for increasing the repressive powers of the capitalist state. In fact, history shows that, far from preventing the rise of the fascist far-right, the capitalist state apparatus is its chief enabler. Moreover, repressive measures introduced in the name of suppressing far-right violence are invariably employed against the working class.

In an emergency parliamentary debate initiated by the NDP late Monday evening, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh appealed for all parties to work together to end the crisis. He tried to conceal this appeal for “national unity” with timid criticism of the Conservatives that obscured how the official opposition is using the Freedom Convoy as

a bludgeon to push for an unpopular hard-right agenda.

During the same debate, Trudeau demagogically accused the occupation of “derailing our democracy.” “This pandemic has sucked for all Canadians,” he added, “but Canadians know the way to get through it is to continue listening to science, continuing to lean on each other, continuing to be there for each other.”

Throughout the pandemic, Trudeau has claimed that his “government has had Canadians’ backs” and is leading the collective efforts of Canadians to fight the pandemic. Nothing could be further from the truth. While enjoying the full backing of the unions and NDP, his government has flouted the science, refusing to pursue a Zero COVID elimination strategy, and instead spearheaded the ruling class’ systematic prioritization of profits over lives.

Thanks to the Liberal government’s bailouts and funneling of vast sums into the financial markets, Canada’s billionaires and super-rich have seen their fortunes swell to new heights amid mass infection and death. Meanwhile, to ensure profit extraction continues, workers have been forced into unsafe workplaces and schools. As a result, Canada has been ravaged by five successive pandemic waves that, according to the official tally, have killed more than 34,800 people.

The most reactionary elements are now cynically seeking to exploit the anger and frustration created by the Trudeau government’s ruinous response to the pandemic to abolish all COVID mitigation measures and drive the Liberals from office.

The working class must intervene independently to defeat the danger posed by the far right and provide its own solution to the current crisis. This must consist of a struggle for a global Zero COVID policy, which can only be enforced through a working class-led political struggle to break the domination of the financial oligarchy over social and economic life.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned yesterday, “Absent the political intervention of the working class, all possible outcomes to the current standoff in Ottawa will produce only a further lurch to the right, imperiling the most fundamental democratic and social rights of the working class.

“If Trudeau reaches a ‘political solution’ with the far-right mob, this will only embolden the fascists and their reactionary backers in ruling circles. Should the Trudeau government call in the military to break up the occupation, the armed forces will assume an unprecedented role in Canadian political life, with the government’s continued viability dependent on placating the military top brass and national security apparatus. And a violent clash between protesters and the police will be exploited by the Conservatives and corporate media to intensify their attacks on Trudeau and their push to bring to power a Boris Johnson-style Conservative regime aligned with the far right.”



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