

Far-right Freedom Convoy protesters blockade busiest Canada-US border crossing, clogging trade and shuttering auto plants

Roger Jordan
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Supporters of the far-right Freedom Convoy have blocked traffic across the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Detroit with Windsor, Ontario, since Monday. The blocking of the busiest Canada-US border crossing has impacted hundreds of millions of dollars in cross-border trade, and forced auto plants and other industrial facilities to temporarily suspend production due to parts shortages in both countries.

The Freedom Convoy began occupying downtown Ottawa two weeks ago today and is vowing to remain until its demand for the abolition of all COVID-19 public health measures is met. Another cross-border blockade manned by Freedom Convoy supporters is in place in Coutts, Alberta, where supplies of foodstuffs and animal feed between Montana and Alberta have been held up. A third blockade at the Emerson, Manitoba, border crossing was reportedly established Thursday afternoon.

This far-right movement, which is led by right-wing extremists and outright fascists, was built up and incited by the Conservatives and large sections of the corporate media to be used as a battering ram against widespread popular support for public health measures to combat the pandemic. It has received extensive political, financial and logistical support from the American far right, beginning with the fascist-minded ex-President and coup-plotter Donald Trump. The ability of the relatively small number of occupiers to have such an impact on economic and political life has also been made possible by the kid-glove treatment they have received from the police, which stands in stark contrast to the ruthless state repression invariably meted out to left-wing protesters.

The blockade of traffic heading north across the bridge to Canada began Monday evening. Although police reported a temporary lifting of the blockade Tuesday afternoon, it was soon reimposed. Traffic has continued to flow at a slow pace from Canada to the US, with long wait times reported.

The Ambassador Bridge is the most important conduit for cross-border trade in North America. More than \$300 million worth of goods are transported across it every day, accounting for 25 percent of all trade between Canada and the US.

Stellantis' Windsor Assembly Plant reported disruptions to

production on Tuesday as just-in-time supply chain links were cut. First and second shifts were cut short at the facility. Toyota has announced that its Ontario plants will not produce any more vehicles this week.

General Motors suspended the second shift Wednesday and Thursday at its Delta Township facility in Lansing, Michigan. Ford reported that its Windsor engine plant would remain shut for the rest of the week, while the Oakville Assembly Plant near Toronto is operating on reduced shifts. Ford parts continue to flow from Canada to its US operations, the company said.

The disruption of the most important bilateral land trade route between Canada and the US is deepening the political crisis of the Trudeau Liberal government triggered by the Freedom Convoy occupation. Calls are increasing in political and business circles for the federal government to find a solution to the standoff, whether by conceding to the Convoy's demands that all anti-COVID restrictions be abolished—a process that is well under way—or through state violence. In recent days, the Canadian press has been full of commentaries urging Trudeau to deploy the military to quash the Ottawa occupation and border blockades.

On Wednesday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki stated that the Biden administration believes the blockade “poses a risk to supply chains for the auto industry.” She added, “We are watching this very closely.”

Psaki noted that officials from the Department of Homeland Security were working with Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and representatives from the Detroit Three automakers on the matter. Some traffic has been rerouted to the Bluewater Bridge connecting Port Huron with Sarnia, Ontario, where the Canada Border Security Agency reported wait times of three hours Thursday morning. “There are a number of steps we have proactively taken,” added Psaki, without providing further details.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* Wednesday declared its solidarity with the far-right Freedom Convoy's call for an end to all anti-COVID measures. “Large swathes of humanity are done with COVID-19 restrictions,” the editorial thundered, and added that everyone should “go back to making their own

health risk assessments.”

Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem also weighed in, stating that “swift resolution” of the disruption of cross-border trade was necessary to avoid “a measurable impact on economic activity.”

A joint statement issued by over 70 Canadian Chambers of Commerce and other business associations demands that “federal, provincial, state and local governments ... work collaboratively to deliver rapid solutions to the illegal blockade of traffic.”

In the face of this mounting chorus of criticism from big business, the Conservatives performed an about-face Thursday, withdrawing their support for the trucker occupations and blockades. “I believe the time has come for you to take down the barricades, stop the disruptive action, and come together,” interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen declared in the House of Commons. “The economy that you want to see reopened ... is hurting.” Bergen combined this shift with the presentation of a motion that will force a parliamentary vote on compelling the minority Liberal government to withdraw all COVID-19 mandates and restrictions by the end of the month.

If the Conservatives are now calling for the Freedom Convoy occupations to end, it is because they have largely achieved their interrelated objectives of ending all anti-COVID mitigation measures, shifting official politics sharply right, and destabilizing and, if possible, bringing down the Trudeau government. Ontario Premier Doug Ford became the last leader in a major province Thursday to announce that he would soon present a plan to scrap all pandemic-related restrictions.

There can be no doubt that behind the scenes, Washington is intensifying the pressure on the Trudeau government to put an end to the far-right protest so as to avoid seriously impacting the auto and other manufacturing sectors. Trudeau’s Liberals, with the firm support of Unifor and the entire trade union bureaucracy, have worked tirelessly since coming to power in 2015, and especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, to portray Canada as a “reliable” and “competitive” location for investors and multinational corporations to do business. These efforts have been focused above all on consolidating a protectionist trade bloc with the United States, which accounts for about three-quarters of Canadian trade.

Washington’s intervention and the increased pressure from big business point to a dramatic intensification of Canada’s political crisis. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained from the outset of the occupation of downtown Ottawa, sections of the ruling elite incited the convoy so as to move official politics sharply to the right. Although the initial target was the dismantling of all COVID-19 restrictions, the Conservatives and their corporate media backers are exploiting the threat of far-right political violence to push Canada to take a more aggressive stance in the war drive against Russia and deepen attacks on the working class as part of “post-pandemic” austerity.

Pressure is now building on the Trudeau government to reach a “political solution” with the occupiers based on making concessions to their murderous demands, or to call in more law enforcement or the military to physically break up the occupation and border blockades. On Tuesday, Liberal MP Joel Lightbound resigned his chairmanship of the party’s Quebec parliamentary caucus and held a press conference to attack Trudeau for “demonizing” people who had criticized his pandemic measures. He demanded a “roadmap” for ending all pandemic restrictions.

Yesterday, the city of Windsor joined various auto industry groups in seeking a court injunction to declare the Ambassador Bridge blockade illegal. The Ontario Superior Court will hear the case tomorrow morning. Earlier, Windsor Mayor Drew Dilkens commented, “We are striving to resolve this issue safely and peacefully. Our community will not tolerate this situation for long. Every hour this protest continues, our community hurts.”

On Thursday afternoon federal Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said RCMP officers have been sent to Windsor and Coutts to help end the blockades. Officers from the Ontario Provincial Police have also been sent by the Ford government to Windsor.

Under these increasingly tense circumstances, should a violent clash occur between the police and members of the blockade, the Conservatives and their ruling class backers will use it to further undermine Trudeau’s position and potentially oust his government in favour of an even more right-wing regime.

The only progressive way out of the current political crisis involves the independent political intervention of the working class. In the early days of the pandemic, it was spontaneous work stoppages by autoworkers in Michigan and Ontario that forced governments in Canada and the US to impose temporary lockdowns, which saved thousands of lives. Workers on both sides of the border subsequently suffered through two years of pandemic policies by governments that have prioritized the protection of corporate profits over human life, claiming the lives of 900,000 people in the United States and over 35,000 in Canada. The working class must take up the struggle for a global Zero COVID strategy to eliminate the virus once and for all, which can only be implemented through a political struggle to break the grip of the financial oligarchy over economic and social life.



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