

Under pressure from the White House and big business, Trudeau vows to do “whatever it takes” to end far-right Canada-US border blockades

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Under mounting pressure from the Biden administration and big business, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a meeting with the leaders of the country's three opposition parties late Thursday to discuss how to end the far-right occupation of downtown Ottawa - referred to in the media as the “Freedom Convoy” - and the blockades of three Canada-US border crossings.

Indicating that all options, including the deployment of the military to forcibly disperse the blockades, are on the table, Trudeau declared in a statement after the meeting that his government would do “whatever it takes.”

At a Friday afternoon press conference, Trudeau was repeatedly asked whether his Thursday statement meant that plans to deploy the armed forces were being prepared. Trudeau responded by claiming that we are “a long way” from such a decision, but added, “[W]e have to be ready for any eventuality.”

The political crisis gripping the Trudeau government has intensified dramatically in recent days. The major economic impact in both the United States and Canada of the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge connecting Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, has provoked a growing clamour from big business and the political establishment for the blockades to be brought down and the far-right siege of Ottawa to be ended.

Even many sections of the ruling elite that promoted the far-right Convoy and fashioned it into an extra-parliamentary movement to shift politics far to the right are now demanding the Convoy end.

There are two principal reasons for this shift.

First, they have been successful in their immediate objective of using the far-right Convoy as a bludgeon to ram through the ending of all anti-COVID-19 mitigation measures and to destabilize the Trudeau government, which they deem insufficiently aggressive in imposing capitalist austerity and in pursuing the predatory interests of Canadian imperialism around the world.

Over the past week one provincial government after another has announced either the immediate or imminent end of all remaining public health restrictions, despite daily COVID-19 deaths remaining at a near pandemic high. Meanwhile, Theresa Tam,

Canada's Chief Officer of Public Health, who serves at Trudeau's pleasure, has endorsed the homicidal claim that COVID-19 must be allowed to run rampant. She recently said that all anti-COVID-19 mitigation measures will need to be “re-examined” in the coming weeks because “this virus isn't going away.”

The second reason that many of the ruling class elements who only a few days ago were championing the far-right Convoy as the authentic voice of “working Joes” are now pressing for its end is the adverse economic impact of the border blockades. These include an almost continuous two-week shutdown of the Alberta-Montana border at Coutts, Alberta, and a blockade of the border crossing at Emerson, Manitoba, that began yesterday. Not only are the blockades causing significant short-term losses; they are raising a large question mark over the viability of the cross-border integrated production chains that are so critical to Canada's manufacturing sector. Already “Buy American” advocates in the US are invoking the blockades as a further argument to reduce the dependence of American plants on Canadian suppliers.

The blockade of the Ambassador Bridge has been ongoing since Monday. The bridge carries over \$300 million worth of goods on a daily basis, accounting for some 25 percent of Canada-US trade. Auto plants and other manufacturing facilities have been forced to close on both sides of the border due to parts shortages. The Detroit Big Three automakers are in talks with the Biden administration and Trudeau government to end the blockades, while over 70 Canadian business organizations have appealed for urgent and decisive measures to bring down the blockades.

Meanwhile, the occupation of downtown Ottawa by Convoy activists entered its third week Friday. The collection of far-right thugs and outright fascists encamped menacingly outside Canada's Parliament building were built up and incited by the official opposition Conservative Party and large sections of the corporate media. They also have received critical political, financial and logistical support from the US far right, beginning with the ex-US president and leader of the failed January 6, 2021 coup attempt, Donald Trump.

The occupiers have vowed to remain in place until all COVID-19 restrictions are abolished and called for overthrow of

the democratically-elected government and its replacement by a 90-day emergency junta composed of Convoy leaders, the unelected Governor General, and unelected Senate.

The major economic impact of the border blockades has caused the Biden administration to openly intervene in the crisis the Convoy has precipitated in Canada. Senior Biden administration officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, held talks with Trudeau government representatives Thursday. At his Friday press conference Trudeau revealed that he had discussed the need to end the blockades in a phone conversation with Biden himself.

Mayorkas reportedly urged Canadian officials to use all the federal powers at their disposal to dismantle the blockades forthwith. A White House statement noted that senior administration officials are “seized with this issue.”

At Thursday’s all-party leaders’ meeting, Trudeau urged opposition leaders to unite around a call for the occupation and blockades to end. He also indicated that his government is working on a plan to clear the border crossings and stop the occupation of downtown Ottawa.

In a statement released following the meeting, New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh made clear his party would support all measures Trudeau decides to take, up to and including a military deployment. In a gesture of accommodation to the far right he demanded the government outline a plan to end all COVID-19 restrictions. Singh appealed to Trudeau to “use every tool available to stop these occupations” and announce “a plan to get Canadians out of the pandemic.”

The Conservatives and sections of the right-wing media have been demanding for the past two weeks that Trudeau meet with the Convoy leaders, a move that he has rejected to date. The alternatives open to the federal government are to increase police deployments to Ottawa and the blockaded border crossings in Windsor, Manitoba and Alberta, or call on the military to forcibly remove the far-right activists.

All of these options are fraught with considerable political risks for the Liberal government. Any compromise gesture made to the far-right occupiers, such as the abandonment of federal vaccine mandates, would embolden the far right and put their Conservative backers on the political offensive. On the other hand, a violent clash between the strengthened ranks of the police and the occupiers, or the deployment of the military to break up the blockades would create conditions for the Conservatives to paint the far-right elements whom they have blessed as “peace-loving patriots” as victims of Trudeau’s “authoritarian” “leftist” regime.

Criticism of Trudeau’s leadership has been mounting on all sides, with a stream of media commentary openly questioning his future as prime minister and Liberal leader.

Earlier Thursday, Conservative interim leader Candice Bergen shifted her position on the occupation and border blockades, which she had previously supported. Speaking in the House of Commons, she declared, “I believe the time has come for you to take down the barricades.” Bergen tabled a motion, which the opposition Bloc Quebecois has vowed to support, that would require the government to present a plan by the end of February to scrap all remaining public health measures. Speaking as if to the far-right

protesters, Bergen declared, “Conservatives have heard you, and we will stand up for all Canadians who want to get back to normal life. We will not stop until the mandates have ended.”

On Friday, Ontario Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency and vowed to end the border blockades and occupation of downtown Ottawa, which he labeled a “siege.” He pledged to “convene cabinet to use legal authorities to urgently enact orders that will make crystal clear it is illegal and punishable to block and impede the movement of goods, people and services along critical infrastructure.” These measures could include fines of up to \$100,000 and prison terms of up to a year for occupiers. Ford, who has sought to balance between extending limited support to the occupiers and criticizing the disruption of daily life in Ottawa, also announced his intention to present a plan to lift all remaining COVID-19 measures.

However, a faction of the Tories continues to unreservedly back the far-right would-be putschists. On February 2 Erin O’Toole was unceremoniously dumped as party leader for failing to give full-throated support to the Convoy. Pierre Poilievre, the frontrunner to succeed him, declared Thursday, “I am proud of the truckers, and I stand with them.” Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe has also refused to call on the far-right Convoy supporters to end their occupations.

The Canadian convoys have rapidly become a *cause célèbre* in far-right and fascist circles around the world, especially after Trump urged his supporters to emulate it. This weekend a like Convoy is supposed to be launched in California, with its arrival in Washington planned for early March. In France, a Convoy started from various locations Wednesday and is to converge in Paris today. Authorities have vowed to use large-scale police deployments to bar them from entering the French capital.

The only progressive solution to the present crisis is through the independent political mobilization of the working class to fight for a global COVID-19 elimination strategy. This requires the building of a mass worker-led movement to overturn the ruling elite’s homicidal pandemic policies, which have been guided by the principle of protecting corporate profits rather than human life. Absent the political intervention of the working class fighting for a socialist program, the inevitable outcome of the current standoff, however it is resolved, will be a further lurch of Canadian political life to the right, imperiling the most fundamental democratic and social rights of the working class.



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