

As far-right siege of Ottawa continues, police dismantle Detroit-Windsor bridge blockade

Our reporter
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Police dismantled Sunday morning the far right-led “Freedom Convoy” blockade of the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Windsor, Ontario, with Detroit, Michigan. Authorities said they expected that traffic across the bridge—the most important commercial conduit between the US and Canada—would resume Sunday evening.

By the time police moved in, less than 30 people were still actively involved in the bridge blockade. Twelve were arrested and several vehicles towed. By mid-afternoon, after police had cleared protesters from approaches to the bridge, they put the total number arrested at between 25 and 30. Most are expected to be charged with criminal mischief.

The Ambassador Bridge blockade began on the afternoon of Monday, February 7, and lasted for the better part of six days. It severely disrupted Canada-US trade, forcing production cuts and plant closures at auto plants on both sides of the border. Top US officials, including President Joe Biden, implored Canadian authorities, beginning with Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to bring the blockade to a quick end. So too did numerous representatives of Canadian big business.

Even at its height, the bridge blockade never involved more than a few hundred people and a smattering of large trucks. If it took the authorities so long to dismantle, it was not because of its widespread support or popular involvement, but because powerful sections of the ruling class have encouraged and built up the far-right convoy.

The Conservative official opposition, much of the corporate media and sections of big business have actively promoted the far-right convoy—including trumpeting its absurd claim to be a “Freedom Convoy”—so as to use it as a battering ram to shatter all remaining anti-COVID-19 public health measures and push politics sharply to the right. The convoy has also received significant political, financial and logistical support from the ex-US President and failed coup-leader Donald Trump, his supporters in the Republican Party leadership like Ted Cruz, and the network of fascist groups that provided the shock troops for the January 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol.

Emboldened by this support, the far-right convoy leaders have taken actions that go beyond the remit given them by their ruling class sponsors. Interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen had no difficulty in hailing the convoy as a movement

of “patriotic, peace-loving Canadians” after convoy supporters ran amuck in downtown Ottawa, taunting and intimidating workers and minorities. However, when their actions caused substantial business losses and threatened the trade links with the US upon which Canadian capitalism depends, it was another matter. Underscoring how the Conservatives have sought to make use of the far-right convoy, Bergen coupled a call last Thursday for it to lift various border blockades and end the now more than two week-old siege of Ottawa to a demand that the federal Liberal government outline a plan to end all anti-COVID-19 public health measures forthwith.

Even with heavy pressure from the White House and big business clamouring for the illegal Ambassador Bridge blockade to be dismantled, it took days for the authorities to intervene and disperse the convoy supporters. For their own reasons, neither Trudeau nor Ontario Premier Doug Ford wanted to be seen as precipitating a violent clash.

The federal Liberal government has been badly destabilized by the far-right convoy, and has effectively greenlighted the unseemly rush of provincial governments across the country to eliminate what remains of pandemic restrictions even amid an ongoing surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths. Trudeau rightly fears that his Conservative opponents and much of the capitalist media would pin the blame for any clash between security forces and the far-right convoy activists on him and his government. Ford, meanwhile, has been anxious not to alienate the anti-vaccination far-right and other advocates of herd immunity, both because he hopes to gain their votes in the coming election and because they have substantial support in his own parliamentary caucus and cabinet.

The police action against the Ambassador Bridge blockade came more than 30 hours after a court injunction came into force at midnight Friday. Despite the injunction and Ontario Premier Ford imposing a province-wide state of emergency Friday, police were remarkably restrained in their treatment of the Ambassador Bridge protesters well into Sunday morning, certainly if compared with the quick and violent actions they routinely take to suppress left-wing protests or when escorting scabs across the picket lines of striking or locked-out workers.

On Saturday, a long line of police backed by at least two armored vehicles and snipers slowly pushed the convoy

supporters, who never numbered more than a few hundred, from the bridge entrance. Even before many of the police involved in Saturday's operations had deployed, most, if not all, of the large trucks that had anchored the bridge blockade had departed, their owners no doubt intimidated by government threats to revoke their commercial licenses or even seize their trucks.

Despite the clearing of the Ambassador Bridge, the Liberal government remains mired in crisis. Ottawa, the national capital, remains under siege by several hundred far-right protesters, some of whom are reportedly heavily armed, and the city's downtown, including the streets adjacent to Parliament Hill, are clogged with commercial trucks. Border blockades at Coutts, Alberta, and Emerson, Manitoba, remain in force. An attempt to establish a new border blockade near Surrey, BC, was made Saturday, when convoy supporters used vehicles to break through police lines.

Relatively small protests in support of the far-right convoy were held for a third weekend in Ottawa and in other cities. These included a Montreal rally addressed by Maxime Bernier, the former Harper Conservative cabinet minister who now leads the ultra-right, anti-immigrant People's Party of Canada.

Although police numbered the protesters in downtown Ottawa on Saturday at just 4,000, they claim to be overwhelmed and unable to enforce the law. Many who joined the Ottawa occupation Saturday engaged in "aggressive and illegal" behaviour, the police reported, while adding that commanders did not ask officers to intervene and enforce the law out of fear for their safety.

A hard-line, openly far-right faction of the Conservatives, including party leadership candidate Pierre Poilievre, continue to support the Ottawa occupation and demand that Trudeau meet with the far-right thugs and would-be putschists who lead the convoy. Most of the political establishment, however, now views the continuing siege of parliament—in its 18th day today—as a threat to the authority not just of the Trudeau government, but the capitalist state.

There are mounting calls from the corporate media for all three levels of government—the federal Liberal government, Ontario Conservative government and Ottawa municipal government—to end the occupation, including if necessary by deploying the Canadian Armed Forces.

At a press conference last Friday, Trudeau said his government is "a long way" from calling out the armed forces, but added it was necessary to be ready for "every eventuality." Following a meeting Saturday of the Trudeau government's Incident Response Group, which brings together senior ministers and officials responsible for national security, a press release was issued that said "all options" are now on the table when it comes to ending the Ottawa occupation.

Speaking on CTV's "Question Period" Sunday morning, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said that the Liberal government is actively considering invoking the Emergencies

Act. The successor to the War Measures Act, the Emergencies Act gives the federal government the authority to deploy the armed forces to provide "aid to civilian power" and wield other extraordinary powers. "We have an Emergency Act," said Blair. "I will tell you, there has been a near constant and vigorous examination of those authorities and what's required. When circumstances exceed the capacity of the provinces to manage it under their authorities, we're quite prepared to use additional authorities that are available to the federal government."

Blair, who was Toronto's chief of police during the vicious crackdown on the left-wing protests against the 2010 G20 summit, also demanded that the Ottawa police "do their job." He termed their failure to act against far-right activists who have broken the law with impunity "inexplicable" (See: Toronto police violently suppress G20 protests, arrest over 600).

Absent the independent political intervention of the working class, the outcome of the present crisis, however it is resolved, will be a further lurch to the right. The chief obstacle to the political mobilization of the working class are the trade unions and New Democrats, which have worked tirelessly since the emergence of the convoy to block counterprotests and strengthen the authority of the Liberal government. After Thursday's all-party leaders' meeting, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh issued a statement confirming that his party would back all measures, i.e., including deploying the military, that Trudeau takes to end the occupation.

On Saturday, despite the unions' opposition, hundreds of Ottawa residents joined two counterprotests to oppose the far-right convoy. Reports on Sunday indicated that small groups were blocking intersections to prevent convoy supporters from reaching the downtown core.



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