

Trudeau invokes Emergencies Act to end far-right Ottawa siege, border blockades

Our reporter
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Canada's Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government is invoking the never-before-used Emergencies Act to put an end to the far-right siege of Parliament Hill and downtown Ottawa, as well as multiple blockades of Canada-US border crossings organized by the so-called "Freedom Convoy."

Adopted in 1988 as the successor to the War Measures Act, the Emergencies Act gives the federal government the power to "take measures that may not be appropriate in normal times" to deal with "a public order emergency" that "seriously endangers the lives, health or safety of Canadians."

At a Monday afternoon press conference, Trudeau, flanked by Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and several other ministers, listed a series of measures that the government is taking under its new emergency powers. These include designating "no-go zones" in downtown Ottawa, around critical infrastructure and at border crossings in which protests and gatherings will be banned and violators subject to immediate arrest. The government has also arrogated the power to commandeer resources necessary to end the occupation of Ottawa, such as tow trucks, and it has ordered banks to freeze financial assets used to support the Convoy. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian equivalent of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), is being given authority to enforce local by-laws and provincial laws.

A general ban on participating in public assemblies deemed to go "beyond lawful protest" will also be enforced. Those who violate the emergency orders are liable to fines of up to \$5,000 and five-year jail terms.

Calling the invocation of the Emergencies Act "a last resort," Trudeau claimed its application will be "geographical" and "time limited."

He also reiterated that his government does not plan to deploy the military against the far-right forces whose illegal and menacing anti-government mobilization has been supported and incited by powerful sections of the ruling class as a battering ram to overcome popular opposition to all remaining COVID-19 public health measures and push politics far to the right. Yet Trudeau and other senior minister have repeatedly said that "all options" to end the two-and-a-half week-long Ottawa occupation and border blockades are under discussion.

Trudeau's invocation of the Emergencies Act—52 years after his father, Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, invoked the War Measures Act on the claim two *Front de Libération du Québec* kidnappings constituted an "apprehended insurrection"—is

a measure of the extreme crisis and vulnerability of his minority Liberal government.

The numbers of people participating in the various far-right Freedom Convoy protests are small to miniscule, be it the Ottawa siege, the Canada-US blockades or the intermittent support demonstrations in provincial capitals and other major cities.

In downtown Ottawa, where streets are clogged by 400 trucks, many of them large rigs, a core group of perhaps 500 far-right activists, some of them reportedly heavily armed, is encamped. The blockades at the Canada-US border crossings in Emerson, Manitoba, and Coutts, Alberta, involve far fewer people.

Shortly before Trudeau announced his government was invoking the Emergencies Act, RCMP officers arrested 13 far-right activists involved in the Coutts blockade and seized a cache of long guns, handguns, multiple sets of body armour, a machete, a large amount of ammunition and high-capacity firearm magazines.

If the far-right Convoy has assumed an outsized political significance radically at odds with its genuine popular support, it is because it has been encouraged and promoted by the Conservative official opposition and much of the corporate media. The Convoy has also benefited from 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.

The first target of these reactionary political forces was the dismantling of all remaining COVID-19 public health measures. But they also want a government that will more aggressively implement austerity against the working class at home and pursue the predatory interests of Canadian imperialism on the world stage.

Trudeau has duly obliged. Even as Omicron infections and deaths continue to surge, driving Canada's official COVID-19 death toll over 35,000, his Liberal government has greenlighted the provincial governments' unseemly rush to scrap almost all remaining anti-COVID public health measures. Ontario, following last week's announcements by Saskatchewan, Alberta, Quebec and Manitoba, announced yesterday that it is accelerating its reopening plan and will end the use of vaccination passports on March 1. At yesterday's press conference, Trudeau responded to a journalist's question by saying that the federal government will soon make its own announcement on how it intends to proceed with the phasing out COVID-19 restrictions.

He tacked onto his emergency powers declaration an

announcement of a further series of measures to militarily strengthen Ukraine, which is serving as the Western imperialist powers' stalking horse in their reckless war drive against Russia. These include the sending of more than \$7 million worth of lethal weaponry to Ukraine and a further loan of \$500 million to the Kiev regime. For months, the Conservatives have fronted a media-backed campaign denouncing the Trudeau Liberals for their reluctance to send lethal armaments to the Ukrainian military, which is dominated by ultra-nationalist and outright fascist forces.

Yesterday's emergency powers announcement was preceded by days of growing acrimony within ruling class circles over the Convoy.

The border blockades, particularly the six-day shutdown of the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit, Michigan—North America's busiest commercial border crossing—have badly disrupted trade and just-in-time supply chains. Alarmed corporate representatives have warned they have even placed a question mark over the close economic partnership with the US upon which Canadian capitalism depends.

With auto plants and other manufacturing facilities in Ontario and Michigan having to slash production and even temporarily shut down, there was a growing clamour from big business and Washington for urgent action to reopen the Ambassador Bridge. Trudeau spoke directly to Biden about the bridge blockade last Friday morning, as well as the role Trump and the US far right have played in promoting and sustaining the Convoy. Over the weekend, as a major police operation was mounted to end the blockade, there was a flurry of calls between Canadian ministers and US secretaries for transportation, emergency preparedness and homeland security.

Freeland addressed these concerns at yesterday's press conference, declaring that the blockades and occupations were damaging Canada's "reputation" as a "reliable trading partner" and place for investment. She cited the Trudeau government's successful renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Trump, so as to make it a more explicitly US-led anti-China protectionist trade bloc, and vowed that the Liberal government would not allow this achievement to be "tarnished."

Another factor causing sections of the ruling elite to endorse the invocation of the Emergencies Act is mounting public anger over the police's kid-glove treatment of the far-right Ottawa occupiers. Widespread outrage over the refusal by police to intervene against illegal behaviour, acts of violence towards workers and local residents, and violations of court injunctions by the occupiers has been expressed on social media and at counterprotests.

This social anger reached a new stage Sunday, when a handful of Ottawa residents blocked a major intersection to prevent several hundred vehicles from joining the main Convoy downtown. Within the space of a few hours, the group increased from 25 to several hundred, and a second blockade preventing Convoy supporters from taking another route sprang up. Comments were widely shared on social media to the effect that 25 unarmed residents had accomplished more in a few hours against the far-right thugs than the police had managed in over two weeks.

Speaking to the CBC, Michael Kempa, a professor of

criminology at the University of Ottawa, summed up the concern gripping sections of the ruling elite, remarking, "This underlines why the state must get control of the streets of Ottawa. Citizens are, in effect, giving up, and the state must demonstrate that the institutions of democracy are able to control the situation."

The most loyal defenders of the state apparatus and the Trudeau government throughout this entire crisis have been the New Democratic Party (NDP) and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy. Even before Trudeau had officially confirmed he was invoking the Emergencies Act, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh told reporters that Canada's social democrats would support the government's action. This all but ensures that the Liberals will secure the legally mandated parliamentary approval of their "public emergency" declaration within the requisite 7 days and that their minority government survives in office. Singh has also said his party would be ready to support the deployment of the military should that prove necessary.

The NDP's pledge of support provides a political opening for the Conservatives to cynically posture as defenders of civil liberties. This after inciting a far-right movement, led and populated by would-be putschists, racists and supporters of QAnon and other fascist groups, which in the name of "freedom" is agitating for the freedom for COVID-19 to run rampant and for employers to maximize their profits by forcing workers to work in unsafe workplaces amid the pandemic.

Following Trudeau's emergency powers announcement, interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen accused Trudeau of choosing to "divide and stigmatize Canadians" and said he was taking a "ham-fisted" approach. Pierre Poilievre, the most likely candidate to take over the party leadership permanently and a full-throated supporter of the Convoy, said Trudeau had "deliberately created" the emergency and urged him to "end the (vaccine) mandates and restrictions so protesters can get back to their lives and their jobs."

From the outset, the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned that, absent the independent political intervention of the working class, this crisis—however it ends—will result in a further lurch to the right that will imperil workers' social and democratic rights.

The invocation of the never-before-used Emergencies Act sets a dangerous precedent. While today it is employed against the far-right enemies of the working class, on the morrow, as the class struggle intensifies, it and similarly authoritarian measures, will inevitably be turned against the working class.



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