

Using emergency powers, Canadian police move to end far-right Ottawa occupation

Keith Jones
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Making use of emergency powers invoked by the federal Liberal government, Canadian security forces initiated a massive police operation Friday to end the menacing far-right “Freedom Convoy” occupation of downtown Ottawa.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of police officers, drawn from the Ottawa, Ontario provincial (OPP), and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), have been deployed on the streets of Canada’s national capital. They are receiving logistical support from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and other security-intelligence agencies.

Ottawa’s acting police chief, Steve Bell, told a late afternoon press conference that as of 3 PM 70 occupiers had been arrested and 21 vehicles towed. He added that plans were in place to remove dozens of parked vehicles left behind by arrested occupiers.

The operation began shortly after 8 AM Friday, when CBC reported that dozens of police had begun to deploy on Wellington Street, which abuts Parliament Hill. Forty-five minutes later, the *Ottawa Citizen* said, “Some 50 police vehicles, ambulances, buses and vans were lined up at Nicholas (Street) near (the University of Ottawa) … and appeared ready to move downtown.”

By early afternoon, CBC was reporting that large numbers of police, backed by tactical units, were proceeding down Wellington and two other major nearby streets, arresting Convoy participants and organizing the towing of their vehicles.

Later Friday, police tweeted that officers were being assaulted by occupiers, who were trying to seize police weapons.

Ottawa Police have warned journalists to stay away from “police operations” for their “own safety,” and threatened that those “found within areas undergoing enforcement may be subject to arrest.”

Last Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked the never-before-used Emergencies Act on the grounds that the far-right Convoy’s siege of downtown Ottawa and blockade of multiple Canada-US border crossings constituted a “public order emergency.”

Police are now employing the emergency powers the government has arrogated under the Emergencies Act and which Trudeau has euphemistically referred to as “additional tools.” At his Friday afternoon press conference, Bell stated, “Without the authorities that have been provided to us through these pieces of legislation, we wouldn’t be able to be doing the work we’re doing today.”

Police are systematically arresting those Convoy supporters who have ignored their repeated orders since Wednesday to immediately vacate downtown Ottawa. On Thursday, police erected a “hard” security perimeter, including fencing, around Parliament Hill and a vast, roughly twelve-by-twenty street section of downtown Ottawa that is the site of numerous offices and hotels and home to 30,000 people. One hundred police checkpoints have been established along the perimeter to ensure that only those who normally live or work in the newly established “No Go Zone” have access.

On Thursday evening, police arrested two of the principal Convoy leaders. Chris Barber faces three charges of counselling others to commit mischief, disobey a court order and obstruct the police. Tamara Lich, an activist in various Alberta separatist and other far-right groups prior to heading the Convoy’s fundraising efforts, faces one count of counselling mischief. Pat King, another Convoy leader and a notorious fascist, was arrested Friday and will likely be charged with the same offenses as Barber.

They and other Convoy leaders had been urging those occupying Ottawa to “hold the line.” Prior to Friday’s events some truckers involved in the siege said they would lock themselves in their trucks and vans if police tried to arrest them.

The numbers involved in the Ottawa siege are, and have always been, small. According to the police, as of the middle of this week, the occupation consisted of only a few hundred people, some with their children in tow, and some 350 large trucks and other vehicles.

However, police have also repeatedly said that a significant portion of the core group of far-right activists and outright fascists spearheading the occupation are heavily armed. Earlier this week, the RCMP seized a cache of weapons and body armour from a group of more than a dozen right-wing extremists participating in the now dispersed Convoy border blockade at Coutts, Alberta. Four have since been charged with conspiracy to commit murder.

If the far-right Convoy has suddenly emerged to play such an outsized role in Canadian political life, it is because the Conservative official opposition and much of the corporate media seized on it as an instrument to press for the elimination of all remaining anti-COVID measures and to push official politics far to the right. The US far-right, from the ex-President and failed coup-plotter Donald Trump to Fox News and the Proud Boys, have also provided important political, financial and logistical support.

Hours before police made their first arrests of Convoy leaders Thursday evening, parliament began debate on a legally required

motion to endorse and extend the emergency powers the government arrogated when it invoked the Emergencies Act last Monday.

The minority Liberal government is all but ensured of getting parliament's approval. This is because the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) publicly declared it was ready to back the use of emergency powers even before the government proclaimed a "public order emergency."

Debate on the government's Emergencies Act motion was supposed to continue Friday with a vote scheduled for next Monday. However, due to the ongoing police operation, much of which is unfolding at parliament's gates, Friday's House of Commons sitting was cancelled at the last minute.

In opening Thursday's debate on the government's invocation of the Emergencies Act, Trudeau repeated his claims of the previous three days that the emergency powers the government is deploying are "proportionate" and "limited" in time and geographic scope.

In fact, the Emergencies Act gives the government sweeping powers of repression and coercion, and the order-in-council that invoked them specifically states that the "public order emergency" applies to the entire country. Moreover, under the never-before-used law, the government can continue to expand its powers through subsequent orders-in-council.

Already, the government has arrogated the power to establish "No-go zones" in which all protests are illegal and to commandeer property (such as tow trucks) to end the occupation and blockades. It has also ordered financial institutions to freeze the accounts of protest organizers and inform CSIS or the RCMP of any financial transactions they suspect could be used to support the Convoy.

Trudeau called the use of the Emergencies Act—the successor to the infamous War Measures Act—a "last resort." He insisted that his government has no other means to end the "illegal" border blockades and Ottawa occupation. Pointing to the economic and geopolitical imperatives behind the government's moves to bring a quick end to the Convoy, after two weeks in which police treated the far-right mobilization with kid gloves, Trudeau termed the blockades and occupation "a threat to our economy and relationship with trading partners." "They are," he continued, "a threat to supply chains and the availability of essential goods, like food and medicine, and they are a threat to public safety."

Interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen responded to Trudeau's defence of authoritarian measures with a cynical and hypocritical denunciation of the government for its "sledgehammer approach." "The prime minister may not like it," said Bergen, "but in Canada, civil liberties must be ardently defended at every turn."

This is all bunk. The extent of Bergen's and the Conservatives' commitment to democratic rights is shown by their avid support for the far-right Convoy, whose leaders have explicitly called for the overthrow of the democratically elected government, and their attempt to use it as an extra-parliamentary instrument to overwhelm popular opposition to the dismantling of anti-COVID restrictions and to push politics to the right. Bergen herself has hailed the Convoy as a movement of "patriotic, peace-loving Canadians." In a leaked email to top party leaders, she argued the

party should support Ottawa's continued occupation so as to make it "Trudeau's problem." And she and the Conservatives have repeatedly demanded that Trudeau meet with—in reality capitulate to—the would-be putschists, white supremacists, and other far-right activists.

If the Conservatives, who two years ago were braying for the military to be deployed against indigenous-led anti-pipeline protests and are always the first to call for laws criminalizing strikes, can posture as defenders of democratic rights, it is because of the foul role that the NDP and trade unions have played throughout the political crisis precipitated by the Convoy.

In response to the fashioning of a far-right extra-parliamentary movement by important sections of the ruling elite, they have strengthened their support for, and alliance with, the big business Liberal government. Throughout the pandemic, the NDP has played the decisive role in securing a parliamentary majority for the Liberals and supported the back-to-work/back-to-school policy that is responsible for almost 36,000 official COVID-19 deaths. The trade unions have sabotaged every effort by workers to oppose dangerous working conditions.

The events of the past three weeks reveal that Canadian democracy is breaking down. The ruling class, fearful of social opposition to its reactionary policies, is turning to authoritarianism and the mobilization of the far right.

First, the Conservatives and corporate media incited and emboldened a far-right movement. Then—fearing its impact on trade, Canada's reactionary economic and military-security partnership with US imperialism, and the authority of the capitalist state—the Trudeau government invokes the Emergencies Act, thereby breaking a "political taboo" and legitimizing the recourse to authoritarian measures.

Workers must beware, history has demonstrated that repressive measures employed by the capitalist state in the name of attacking the far right are invariably deployed against the working class and with far more vigour, brutality and consistency.

The defence of democratic rights, like the fight for a science-based pandemic policy that prioritizes saving lives over capitalist profit, requires the independent political mobilization of the working class.



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