

Hundreds arrested in Ottawa as police, using emergency powers, end far-right “Freedom Convoy” occupation

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A massive police operation to end the three-week-long, far-right “Freedom Convoy” occupation of downtown Ottawa appeared to be winding down Sunday evening, after three days.

Earlier Sunday, police said they had arrested 191 people in the operation launched Friday morning to evict those besieging parliament and a wide swathe of downtown Ottawa.

A still larger number of those that for days defied police orders they remove themselves and their vehicles from the occupation site were simply allowed to leave.

The police crackdown against the far-right protesters, who had run amuck for weeks intimidating local residents and flouting anti-COVID restrictions, was unprecedented in its scope.

It relied on the expansive coercive powers the Liberal government arrogated when it declared a “public order emergency” on Monday, Feb. 14 under the never-before-used Emergencies Act.

The Ottawa Police, Ontario Provincial Police and Royal Canadian Mounted Police led the police action. It was logistically supported by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Also involved were officers drawn from police tactical units across the country, including from as far afield as Alberta and British Columbia. Just how many police were deployed on Ottawa’s streets last weekend the authorities have, as of yet, refused to say. Previously, Ottawa Police had asked the federal and Ontario governments to provide an additional 1,800 officers.

Prior to moving in to clear the occupiers, police established a massive no-go zone Thursday. Reinforced in places with fencing, it comprised an area of downtown Ottawa roughly 12x20 blocks wide that is home to 30,000 people. Police set up a hundred checkpoints along their “security perimeter” so as to allow access only to those who live or work in the area.

While police were deployed in large numbers starting Friday morning in a clear show of strength, they also demonstratively sought to avoid confrontation. Those on the police frontlines tasked with slowly pushing back the demonstrators did not wear helmets or brandish police batons, let alone appear in full battle-style riot gear.

On Saturday, when police cleared the area on Wellington Street directly in front of the parliament buildings and met with more determined push-back from Convoy supporters, they did use their batons but only as a means to push back the protesters.

Ottawa Police reported late Saturday that 53 vehicles had been towed since the operation began, over 20 licence plates seized, and 11 commercial truck licences cancelled. They also reported that several occupiers were armed when they were detained, including with smoke grenades, gas canisters, fireworks and body armour.

Also Saturday, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino told parliament that since the Emergencies Act was invoked, banks acting at the government’s behest had frozen 76 bank accounts belonging to people involved in the occupation containing more than \$3 million.

Reports late Saturday suggested that some occupiers had attacked police officers with unspecified weapons. Police responded by using riot-control guns that are capable of firing rubber bullets and chemical agents.

The isolated reports of police using force to detain unruly occupiers and the police’s conduct throughout the three-day operation are in striking contrast with the savage violence—be it baton-charges, tear-gas barrages, or mass arrests—they routinely use when repressing left-wing demonstrators or escorting scabs across worker picket lines.

The Convoy was systematically built up and incited by the Conservative Party and sections of the right-wing media. They portrayed the small rabble of far-right activists, owner-operator truckers, and outright fascists as a popular movement speaking on behalf of “ordinary working Joes.” Crucial political, financial and logistical support came from the fascist-minded former US President Donald Trump and his fellow January 6, 2021, coup plotters, as well as far-right circles across the United States. Their aim was to use the convoy as a battering ram against widespread popular support for anti-COVID 19 public health measures, and to shift official politics sharply to the right.

To date, the Conservatives and their media backers have largely succeeded. This is thanks above all to the combined

efforts of the trade unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) to prevent the working class from intervening independently in the political crisis. While Ottawa was under occupation by the far-right, provincial governments from coast to coast moved to scrap virtually all remaining COVID-19 public health measures with the approval of the Trudeau Liberal government. For their part, Trudeau's Liberals have announced an even more confrontational stance towards Russia by agreeing to arm the right-wing Ukrainian regime with lethal weaponry as part of the US-led war drive in Eastern Europe.

The federal government ultimately chose to invoke the Emergencies Act to end the occupation after far-right Convoy blockades of key Canada-US border crossings held up billions of dollars in bilateral trade. Beyond the immediate impact, which included the temporary shutdown of auto plants on both sides of the border, Canada's corporate elite was chiefly concerned that the interruption of cross-border supply chains would damage Canadian capitalism's long-term credibility as a reliable trading partner and location for investment. With the White House and big business on both sides of the border demanding immediate action, even those sections of the ruling elite that had promoted the Convoy urged the occupiers and blockaders to go home.

Nevertheless, the Conservatives have continued to extend political cover to the far-right extra-parliamentary movement that they helped fashion. Interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen has cynically attacked the Trudeau government for invoking emergency powers "prematurely," and postured as a defender of "civil liberties."

On Saturday, the United Conservative Party (UCP) Premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney, who hailed the Convoy as it made its way to Ottawa last month, announced his government would take the federal government to court over its invocation of the Emergencies Act. Kenney, who is facing a challenge to his leadership and is desperate to appeal to the substantial far-right base within his UCP, attacked the emergency powers as "unnecessary and disproportionate."

The hypocrisy in these comments is hard to beat. Not only was Kenney a leading backer of the Convoy, whose leaders explicitly declared their intention to overthrow the democratically-elected government and replace it with an authoritarian junta. His government has adopted its own draconian legislation banning protests at locations deemed to be "critical infrastructure," a move aimed at suppressing left-wing and Indigenous demonstrations. On the same day Kenney railed against the "unnecessary" federal emergency powers, a leaked letter from a senior official in his government revealed that Alberta requested help from the federal authorities just two weeks earlier, on February 5, to clear the border blockade at Coutts.

Parliament resumed debate on the minority Liberal government's recourse to the Emergencies Act on Saturday,

after proceedings had to be suspended all day Friday due to the police operation. A vote is planned for 8 p.m. Monday.

The Liberals are virtually assured of a parliamentary majority for their use of emergency powers because the NDP has once again rallied round the government. NDP leader Jagmeet Singh vowed even before Trudeau proclaimed a "public order emergency" last Monday that his party would vote with the government. He added that the NDP would also support the military's deployment on the streets of Ottawa, if needed.

No substantial section of the NDP has criticized the party's fulsome support for the strengthening of the apparatus of state repression. Long-time MP Charlie Angus told the *National Post* that voting for the Emergencies Act was "the last thing" he expected to do in parliament, but concluded by saying, "That's the responsibility of being an elected official. Sometimes you're faced with a tough situation and you have to make a decision."

The trade unions, which have played a pivotal role in blocking any opposition from the working class to the far-right Convoy and the dismantling of anti-COVID measures, have likewise failed to make any serious criticism of the government's use of emergency powers. In a statement released Wednesday, the Canadian Labour Congress made a vague declaration of support for people standing up to "racism" and "hate," while not even acknowledging that the Emergencies Act had been invoked for the first time ever. As the saying goes, silence denotes consent.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions and NDP have been a critical bulwark of the Trudeau government and its homicidal open economy/open school policies, which have prioritized the accumulation of corporate profits over the protection of human life. While the unions have suppressed all expressions of independent working class opposition to the spread of the virus, the NDP has assured Trudeau a parliamentary majority on all key matters.

These organizations deliberately ignore the fact, proven by countless historical experiences, that moves to strengthen the powers of the capitalist state in the name of fighting "fascism" or the far right, invariably pave the way for repressive state action against mounting working class opposition. Moreover, the ruling elite's ever more open reliance on security forces to uphold "law and order" will only serve to embolden the very same state institutions, like the police and military, that have long served as breeding grounds for the far-right and anti-democratic conspiracies.



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