

Canada's parliament endorses Trudeau's use of emergency powers, as the union-backed NDP votes with government

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Canada's minority Liberal government has secured a parliamentary majority for its invocation of special powers under the Emergencies Act to end the far-right Freedom Convoy's occupation of Ottawa and border blockades.

The trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) voted unanimously to give retroactive sanction to the government's resort to the never-before-used legislation in a House of Commons vote held late Monday evening. Federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh had pledged that Canada's social democrats would support the Liberal government's invocation of the Emergencies Act even before Trudeau proclaimed a "public order emergency" on the afternoon of February 14.

The successor to the draconian War Measures Act, the Emergencies Act permits the government to take measures that "may not be appropriate in normal times" for up to 30 days.

The special powers the Liberal government has specifically arrogated—and which currently remain in effect—include the power to declare no-go zones where all gatherings are banned, and impose a blanket prohibition on assemblies deemed to go "beyond lawful protest." The government has also given itself the power to commandeer equipment needed to help end the emergency, and to freeze the bank accounts of Convoy leaders. Those who violate a government emergency order are liable to fines of up to \$5,000 and five years in prison.

MPs approved the use of the Emergencies Act by 185 votes to 151. Both the Liberal and NDP caucuses voted unanimously in favour, along with the Green Party's Elizabeth May. The Conservatives and Bloc Québécois voted against, cynically citing concerns about "civil liberties."

Earlier Monday, Trudeau made clear that the government viewed the Emergencies Act vote as a confidence matter. Anyone voting against the invocation of the act would be saying they "did not trust the government," he told a press

conference. He also said that the public order emergency persists, even if the Ottawa occupation and blockades have been dispersed. Asked when the government would rescind its emergency powers, Trudeau would only say it would do so as soon as possible. In support of Trudeau's remarks, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino noted that small groups of Convoy supporters remain in and around Ottawa. He also claimed that there continues to be a threat that cross-border traffic could be disrupted.

As the main police operation in downtown Ottawa came to a conclusion Monday, police announced that they had made 196 arrests in the four preceding days and laid 391 criminal charges.

Yesterday police continued to tightly control access to part of the city's downtown core near Parliament Hill, although their "security zone" had shrunk considerably from the height of the police crackdown last weekend. From Thursday evening through Monday morning, police maintained a security cordon—using fencing, vehicles and police personnel—that encircled a 12-by-20 street area that is home to some 30,000 people.

Responding to Monday's House of Commons vote, interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen asserted that her party "stood up for Canadians and voted against this government overreach." Pierre Poilievre, a leading candidate for the party leadership and one of the far-right Convoy's most vocal advocates in parliament, accused the government of replacing "the people's freedom with the government's power."

This is all nonsense. The Conservative politicians now posing as warriors for "democracy" were complicit in building up and inciting the Convoy—a far-right, extra-parliamentary movement whose leaders were explicitly committed to overthrowing the democratically elected government and installing a dictatorial junta. Bergen, Poilievre and their supporters in the right-wing media promoted the Convoy because they wanted to use the far-

right as shock troops to ram through the repeal of all anti-COVID measures in the face of widespread popular opposition, and shift official politics sharply to the right. The only “freedoms” these people care about are the “freedom” of the virus to cause mass infection and death and the “freedom” of corporate Canada to rake in huge profits.

With downtown Ottawa occupied by a menacing far-right movement that the Conservatives lauded as comprised of “patriotic, peace-loving Canadians” and a grassroots movement of “ordinary working Joes,” the Liberal government gave the go-ahead for provincial governments across the country to scrap almost all COVID-19 restrictions. Only when the far-right convoy went further than its ruling class sponsors had intended and blocked several border crossings, disrupting billions of dollars in Canada-US trade, did the Trudeau government turn to the Emergencies Act. Trudeau used the February 14 press conference at which he invoked the act to impose another demand of his right-wing critics: the sending of lethal weaponry to the ultra-nationalist Ukrainian regime.

In justifying their resort to emergency powers, Trudeau and his ministers made clear that their principal concern was not safeguarding democratic rights, but the reputation and interests of Canadian imperialism and big business. Government ministers referred to the necessity to guard against “adverse effects” on Canada’s “economic recovery,” safeguard relations with “our trading partners,” and avoid tarnishing Canada’s image as a safe place to “invest” and do business.

Trudeau and his supporters have repeatedly insisted that the Emergencies Act is not the War Measures Act, because it provides for parliament to hold the government to account and because the government’s actions will be subject, after the fact, to judicial review under the constitution’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The latter’s very first clause stipulates that the freedoms it purportedly guarantees are subject to “such reasonable limits” as can be “demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.”

Once the public order emergency is lifted or, if it is not extended by a second parliamentary vote, expires after 30 days, a committee composed of MPs from the House of Commons and senators from the Senate will be established to review the Emergencies Act’s implementation.

Yesterday in the Senate’s debate on approving the use of emergency powers, Marc Gold, the Liberal government’s representative in Canada’s upper chamber, revealed that all members of this joint committee will have to take an oath of secrecy before taking up their posts. This all but guarantees that any evidence of government or police abuses can be kept out of the public eye.

With its support for Trudeau’s invocation of the

Emergencies Act, the NDP has legitimized the use of autocratic emergency powers that in the future can and will be used against the working class. It has also underscored its commitment to keeping the big business Trudeau Liberal government in office.

Singh and the NDP, with the full-throated support of the trade unions, have been the principal and preferred prop of the Liberal government since it lost its parliamentary majority in the 2019 elections. During the past two years of the pandemic, the NDP has backed the Trudeau government while it funneled hundreds of billions in bailout funds to the banks and financial oligarchy and spearheaded the capitalist elite’s open economy/open schools policy, which is responsible for the COVID-19 deaths of over 35,000 Canadians. It has also supported the government in dramatically hiking military spending to pursue imperialist aggression and war abroad.

In light of this record of loyalty to the Liberals, Canadian big business’ traditional preferred party of government, Singh somewhat laughably suggested that his party will be vigilant in ensuring the government does not misuse its emergency powers. Claiming that the NDP was providing “reluctant support” to the use of the Emergencies Act, Singh remarked, “It’s not a blank cheque. We are prepared to pull our support as soon as ... the act is no longer needed.”

The response of the trade unions has been more pathetic still. The Canadian Labour Congress has yet to even acknowledge the government’s now more than week-old invocation of the Emergencies Act. While Ottawa was under occupation by far-right thugs, unions like the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Ontario Nurses Association conspired to suppress and sabotage counterprotests.

History has shown time after time that the strengthening of the capitalist state apparatus in the name of “defending democracy” or combatting “fascism” invariably results in stepped-up repression directed against the working class. The no-go zones, bans on assemblies, and powers allowing police to conduct mass arrests wielded today against far-right Convoy supporters will sooner rather than later be turned against striking workers or opponents of Canadian and US imperialism’s war drive against Russia.



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