

# Trudeau's deployment of emergency powers—a warning to workers across Canada

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government deployed emergency powers, under the never-before-used Emergencies Act, for ten days last month to put an end to the far-right Freedom Convoy's occupation of downtown Ottawa and blockades of various border crossings. Apart from the country's most powerful business lobby groups, the Business Council of Canada and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, some of the strongest support for this authoritarian action has come from Canada's "progressive" and ostensibly "left" organizations.

Even before Trudeau declared a "public order emergency" on Feb. 14, the leader of the trade union-backed New Democratic Party, Jagmeet Singh, had pledged his party's support. A week later, when the minority Liberal government sought the House of Commons' mandatory retroactive approval for its invocation of the Emergencies Act, it secured it thanks to the unanimous support of Canada's social democrats. Charlie Angus, who is often portrayed as a "left" voice on the NDP's frontbench, summed up the party's attitude when he declared during the Commons' debate, "(W)hat we saw yesterday was policing at its best in this country... We cannot be made to look like a failed state to the world."

Party elder statesman Ed Broadbent, who was a member of the NDP caucus that voted against Pierre Elliott Trudeau's invocation of the War Measures Act in 1970, gave his seal of approval to the party's support for the current Liberal government and its use of emergency powers. "The Emergencies Act is not the War Measures Act," Broadbent claimed, adding, "The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is not suspended. There is parliamentary oversight. And the act would expire in its application after 30 days."

"Progressive" media outlets struggled to contain their enthusiasm for the massive police operation mounted, using the emergency powers, against the Ottawa occupation. Supported logistically by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, it brought together tactical police units from across the country and involved the establishment of a police No-Go zone covering a large part of downtown Ottawa. The title of a *National Observer* article approvingly declared that Convoy participants had gotten "a reality check," while another article applauded the police for moving in "calmly and forcefully." The Canadian Labour Congress, Canada's largest union federation, was so little troubled by the government's resort to emergency powers that it did not make any public mention of it, including in a February 15 statement on the Convoy titled "Canada's unions stand with those who stand against hate."

## A dangerous precedent

Workers should reject such complacency and political stupidity. The Trudeau government deployed the Emergencies Act to uphold the predatory geostrategic interests of Canadian imperialism and the profits of

big business, not protect the democratic and social rights of working people.

The invocation of this never-before-used legislation and its endorsement by the House of Commons marks a major shift to the right within official politics. It breaks a "political taboo" on using emergency powers and sets the stage for a more ruthless enforcement of Canadian imperialist interests against the working class at home and Ottawa's geopolitical rivals abroad. This process can only be halted through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The successor to the draconian War Measures Act, the Emergencies Act permits the federal government to employ coercive measures that "may not be appropriate in normal times." When the act is in force, the federal government is empowered to make new laws by decree and expand its powers as it sees fit. The only provisos are that parliament must retroactively approve the act's invocation, can repeal any or all of the emergency powers the government arrogates, and the emergency must expire after 30 days unless its extension is approved by parliament.

To put an end to the far-right Convoy the Trudeau government arrogated the power to: impose No-Go zones in which protests and gatherings were prohibited, with violators subject to immediate arrest; ban participation in public assemblies deemed to "go beyond lawful protest"; and order financial institutions to freeze the accounts of anyone or any organization identified as responsible for the "public order" emergency. The federal government also gave itself the power to commandeer equipment and other resources needed to end the emergency, such as tow trucks to clear the far-right occupation of Ottawa.

Anyone who violated any of these emergency provisions is liable to fines of up to \$5,000 and/or imprisonment for up to five years.

Broadbent's argument that adherence to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms serves as a check on these extraordinary powers is a lie. First, the Charter's very first clause stipulates that all rights contained within it are subject to "reasonable limits" determined by a "free and democratic society." This gives the government and state institutions vast leeway to limit and run roughshod over democratic rights, especially in an "emergency." Second, any determination that the government has abused its prerogative under the Emergencies Act to limit and suspend democratic rights would come only years after the fact, after a lengthy judicial process culminating at Canada's Supreme Court.

The political justifications that Trudeau and his ministers advanced for invoking the Emergencies Act make clear that it did so to defend Canada's geostrategic and economic relationship with the United States, uphold the authority of the state, and ensure, to use the words of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, that Canada retains its reputation as a "competitive" place for "investment" and "business."

The order-in-council published in the *Canada Gazette* explained the Emergencies Act was required due to "the threat or use of acts of serious violence against persons or property, including critical infrastructure, for the purpose of achieving a political or ideological objective." Further

reasons included “the adverse effects on the Canadian economy recovering from the impact of the pandemic,” the “adverse effects” on “Canada’s relationships with its trading partners, including the United States,” “the breakdown in the distribution chain and the availability of essential goods, services, and resources,” and “[t]he potential for an increase in the level of unrest and violence that would further threaten the safety and security of Canadians.”

It is not hard to imagine how during a future major strike by industrial workers, cries will be raised from big business demanding state repression because strikers are causing “adverse effects on the Canadian economy.” Or perhaps the Conservatives and their right-wing media backers, who fraudulently portrayed the occupation of downtown Ottawa by a far-right mob threatening to overthrow the government as a movement standing up for “working Joes,” will demand a police state crackdown the next time a popular protest takes place against Canadian imperialism’s role in the US-led war drive against Russia, because it poses a threat to “Canada’s relationships with its trading partners, including the United States.”

Because the NDP and unions have rallied round the Trudeau government and its use of emergency powers, the door has been opened for the Conservatives and the right-wing media to cynically posture as defenders of “civil liberties” by opposing the resort to emergency powers. Thus, the likes of the *Toronto Sun* and interim Conservative leader Candice Bergen—that is, the very same forces who incited and fashioned the Convoy into a far-right extra-parliamentary movement in order to push politics far to the right—are now feigning concern over democratic rights.

This is no less absurd than the assertion by Trudeau and his “progressive” apologists that deploying the Emergencies Act will safeguard “democracy.” The Ottawa occupiers were not engaged in a peaceful protest, but rather a menacing act of political intimidation. For 24 days they besieged downtown Ottawa, flouting anti-COVID restrictions and bullying and terrorizing local residents. The initiators and leaders of the Convoy publicly declared their aim to be the ouster of the democratically elected government and its replacement by an authoritarian junta. To claim under such conditions that workers should oppose the Emergencies Act because they have an obligation to defend the “democratic rights” of the far-right activists and outright fascists is preposterous.

### **The far right and the capitalist state’s “bodies of armed men”**

Working-class opposition to the Emergencies Act is necessary because history shows that whenever institutions of the capitalist state are strengthened in the name of combatting the far right and defending “democracy,” they are invariably turned against the working class—and with far more speed and violence. Moreover, the very institutions supposedly tasked with defending “democracy,” the police, intelligence agencies, and the military, have proven time and time again to be breeding grounds for the very far-right and fascistic forces they are allegedly suppressing.

In July 2020, a far-right military reservist who was on active duty attempted to assassinate Trudeau at his official residence. Corey Hurren denounced the Prime Minister for trying to introduce a “communist dictatorship” in a note discovered by police after his arrest while heavily armed on the grounds of Rideau Cottage, where Trudeau resides.

In December, a report by the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency, the state watchdog agency tasked with ensuring the intelligence agencies do not violate the law, noted that white supremacists and neo-Nazis in the Canadian military pose an “active counterintelligence threat,” and that the authorities are “limited in their ability” to identify these

forces in the ranks.

As the Convoy approached Ottawa, the military was so concerned about support for the far-right mob within its elite Special Forces unit, Joint Task Force 2, that it circulated a code of conduct among its members to remind them of their obligation to stay “above the fray of political debate.” On February 13, the *Ottawa Citizen* revealed that two soldiers from the unit, which is responsible for counterterrorism missions and providing security to the Prime Minister, were under investigation for participating in the occupation.

As for the RCMP, which is now being touted by “left” and “progressive” politicians as a key prop of “democracy” and the “rule of law,” this institution of savage state repression—whose origins lie in Canadian capitalism’s bloody and violent dispossession of the Native population—has a more than century-long record of infiltrating and repressing left-wing movements and critics of Canadian capitalism. Just three months ago, RCMP officers in British Columbia illegally seized two journalists documenting the police’s aggressive assault on protests by the Wet’suwet’en First Nation and their supporters against the Coastal Gas Link pipeline. Photojournalist Amber Bracken and documentary filmmaker Michael Toledano were seized by heavily armed officers November 19, 2021, in a violent raid that made Bracken feel like she was being “kidnapped.”

Throughout the Ottawa occupation, the police treated the far-right occupiers with kid gloves. Whether due to support for the Convoy among police commanders, or the fear that their officers might balk at taking action against the far-right occupiers, the police avoided the deployment of the ruthless violence and riot-control methods that are ubiquitous when left-wing protesters take to the streets.

The same tendencies are evident internationally. In Germany, the ruling elite systematically built up the neofascist Alternative for Germany as a major opposition party. Germany’s state institutions, including the military, intelligence agencies, and police, are infested with right-wing extremist networks that have openly laid plans to assassinate political opponents on a so-called “Day X.” In France and Spain, senior military officers have engaged in antidemocratic conspiracies, including open coup plotting.

In the United States, ex-President Donald Trump’s attempted fascist coup on January 6, 2021, enjoyed strong support from substantial sections of the Republican Party, military veterans, and the police. The ease with which the far-right and fascist thugs seized control of the US Capitol, one of the most heavily guarded buildings in the world, and almost took congressmen hostage as part of Trump’s months-long plot to overturn the presidential election result underscored that his authoritarian power grab was tacitly approved, if not actively supported, by significant sections of the state’s security apparatus.

Canada’s ruling elite is moving in the same authoritarian direction. Over recent years, the Trudeau government and its provincial counterparts have virtually outlawed the right to strike, at least whenever workers find themselves in a position of strength. In the name of the “war on terror,” the intelligence agencies have been given since 2001 vast new powers to spy on and disrupt political opponents—powers that are directed principally towards suppressing social opposition from below. Calls are already being made from many quarters for some of the powers the Trudeau government invoked during last month’s ten-day emergency, such as the ban on protests in the environs of “critical infrastructure,” to be made permanent.

The ruling class views its vast repressive state powers as essential if it is to withstand mounting popular opposition to unprecedented levels of social inequality, the reckless drive to war, and the prioritization of corporate profits over the safeguarding of human life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The vast majority of workers for whom the reactionary views of the far-right Freedom Convoy are anathema should not permit their opposition to

fascistic political violence to be corralled behind support for the Trudeau government and the capitalist state. This requires first and foremost a settling of political accounts with the NDP and trade unions, which proved throughout the Convoy's occupation of Ottawa to be the chief impediments to an independent political response by the working class to the danger of far-right political violence and the ruling elite's pandemic policy of mass infection and death.

As the Socialist Equality Party stressed in its statement, "Canadian workers need a socialist program to defeat the threat of far-right political violence, end the pandemic and oppose war":

The fight for a socialist and internationalist program in Canada necessitates an unrelenting struggle for the political and organizational independence of the working class from the pro-austerity, pro-war NDP and the pro-capitalist trade unions. The claim that workers must support the 'progressive' parties, i.e., the Liberals or NDP, to stop the hard-right Conservatives has been used for decades to prevent workers taking the road of independent political struggle... (If the Liberal/NDP/union alliance remains unchallenged and therefore able to smother working-class opposition, this will only further embolden reaction and pave the way for the far-right to exploit the deepening social crisis to mobilize support among backward sections of the middle class.



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