

Canada's trade unions in nationalist frenzy amid Trump's trade war

Roger Jordan
5 February 2025

Since US President Donald Trump first raised his threatened 25 percent tariff on imports from Canada, Canadian political, media, and public life has been dominated by a deluge of reactionary, flag-waving nationalist propaganda. Leading the way in proclaiming that “we are all in this together”—i.e., billionaires and workers, the political representatives of big business in the federal and provincial governments and the population as a whole—have been the country's major trade unions and union federations.

Trump issued an executive order on Saturday, February 1, that imposed, effective Tuesday, February 4, 25 percent tariffs on all Canadian and Mexican imports, apart from Canadian energy imports, which would be subject to a lower tariff of 10 percent. Hours later, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced retaliatory tariffs on \$155 billion of goods in a televised national address.

Although the US president concluded a last-minute deal with Trudeau on Monday to “pause” the tariffs for one month, US imperialism's global trade war has only begun. Nobody within Canada's political establishment believes that the threat of tariffs has been permanently removed.

Trump has concluded a similar short-term agreement with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum.

Both deals were predicated on the militarization of North America's borders. But Trump has made clear that his demands go much further, including by repeating his call for Canada to become America's 51st state.

The North American tariff war is a reactionary conflict, being waged by rival nationally based capitalist cliques for markets, profits and investment. It arises from the deepening crisis of world capitalism, and it is workers—Canadian, Mexican and American—who will pay the price for it in the form of job losses, price rises and social dislocation.

Tariffs are charged on imported goods when they cross the border, meaning that the company importing the goods can make one of two choices when tariffs are imposed. They can either increase the prices for their product, passing the cost onto consumers, or they cancel their import order, reducing production and driving workers out of a job.

The CLC and CUPW leaders consort with Trudeau's strikebreaker-in-chief

Workers under any illusions about the class interests behind the flag-waving “Team Canada” blitz should take note of the fact that the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada's largest trade union federation, held a meeting of its national executive Sunday evening attended by strikebreaker-in-chief Steven MacKinnon to discuss how they can best assist the government and big business in defending Canadian capitalism.

As Labour Minister in Trudeau's Liberal government, MacKinnon directly intervened in four labour disputes to ban strikes with arbitrary orders in the last six months of 2024. The effective outlawing of strikes by MacKinnon and the Trudeau government, who the unions now claim are close allies in responding to Trump's tariffs, is aimed at enforcing a massive onslaught on public services, and gutting worker rights and conditions throughout the public and private sectors.

MacKinnon's orders, based on a cooked-up re-interpretation of the anti-democratic powers contained within Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, included the ending of a month-long strike by 55,000 postal workers in December, and strikes by 9,300 rail workers at Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City in August. This did not stop Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) President Jan Simpson joining Sunday's meeting with MacKinnon.

Canada's union bureaucrats are using the most vulgar and reactionary nationalist tub-thumping in their efforts to dragoon workers behind corporate Canada in its trade conflict with its US rivals. On Monday, the CLC issued a bitter denunciation of everything American that implicitly attacked the Trudeau government for not going far enough with its retaliatory proposals. The CLC headlined its statement, “Cut off U.S. energy and resources now: No energy, no critical minerals, no oil and gas.”

The union bureaucrats' “militant” call for implementing sweeping retaliatory measures when the interests of Canadian imperialism are at stake provides a striking contrast to the lethargic indifference they display when workers' rights are under attack.

In December 2024, when MacKinnon banned the postal workers' strike, so as to clear the way for a massive restructuring of the postal service, including “Amazonifying” its labour practices, it took the CLC three days to issue a statement. Complementing Simpson and the CUPW leaderships' actions in unilaterally enforcing a surrender to the back-to-work order despite mass rank-and-file sentiment for defiance, the CLC's statement treated the strike's end as a fait accompli. It made no proposals for action in support of the postal workers, and merely called on Trudeau, whose minority government the unions have staunchly supported, to reflect on its patently illegal use of Section 107 to suppress workers' struggles.

However, now, with tariffs threatening to cut into corporate Canada's markets and profits, the CLC comes out with all guns blazing. When it comes to workers taking action to defend their jobs and working conditions, the union bureaucrats are adamant that workers must abide by contracts. Calls for sympathy job action, let alone a general strike, make them livid. But when it comes to defending Canadian capital, they are ready to countenance corporate contracts being tossed aside and pipelines and other infrastructure being shut down.

Revealing the hostility of the bureaucracy towards workers on both sides of the border, the CLC statement demanded, “(T)he United States must feel immediate pain,” indifferent to the fact that the “pain” they propose

would be borne by American workers through exploding energy bills and prices at the pump. As for Mexican workers, they did not even rate a mention, even though some 5 million jobs there are threatened by Trump's tariffs. This is typical for Canada's unions, which are notorious for stoking the most reactionary Mexican chauvinism and outright racism, such as during Unifor's campaign to "save" GM's Oshawa car plant.

That Canadian workers would fair no better if the CLC has its way was underscored by its meeting with MacKinnon and the positive reference in its February 3 trade war statement to the Liberal government's policies at the start of the pandemic. According to the CLC statement, government policies "helped stabilize our economy." During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trudeau government, supported by the CLC and corporate Canada—in what CLC president Hassan Yussuff at the time labelled a "collaborative front"—transferred \$650 billion literally overnight to the banks and major corporations. Workers were laid off en masse and paid a pittance of \$500 per week for a brief period, but this support was rapidly slashed as the federal government and entire political establishment embraced a policy of mass infection and death to boost corporate profits.

Numerous studies have shown the dramatic growth in the wealth of the billionaires since 2020. Over the same period, poverty and homelessness have spiked and public services have teetered toward collapse, due to inflation-driven real wage cuts, the sharp rise in interest rates, and "post-pandemic" government austerity.

Unifor clamours for "national unity" to "save our country"

Unifor, Canada's largest private-sector union, is at least the equal of the CLC in purveying nationalist poison. Unifor President Lana Payne, who has joined Trudeau's corporatist Council on Canada-US Relations along with corporate executives and government ministers, declared Saturday, "I believe Trump has underestimated Canadians. He has failed to realize that he has enraged and united an entire nation that is ready to fight to defend every last job in this country ... [W]e must take every measure possible—utilize every ounce of creativity we have—to build a strong, resilient, and diverse economy to never be held hostage by America again."

After Monday's temporary reprieve in the imposition of tariffs and counter-tariffs, Payne doubled down on her nationalist harangues, proclaiming that everyone must unite to "save" Canada. "I think for Canada right now, everything has changed forever. This is a major turning point for our country. We are a sovereign country and we have to protect Canadian workers and our country right now."

Peddlers of nationalist snake oil like Payne and her predecessor, the corrupt COVID profiteer Jerry Dias, have never "protected" workers in Canada, but only capitalists. Unifor's predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, split from the United Autoworkers 40 years ago on the basis of the lie that the cheaper Canadian dollar and more "militant" union leadership would allow them to defend "Canadian jobs." Instead, competing in a race to the bottom with the UAW, they pitted workers on both sides of the border against each other by promoting Canadian and American nationalism, while the globally mobile automakers laughed all the way to the bank. Tens of thousands of auto and manufacturing jobs have been lost, plants closed, and communities devastated by round after round of concessions negotiated and approved by the unions on the basis of this nationalist strategy, which the union bureaucracy now wants to intensify.

The unions may be shouting loudest about the need for Canadian "national unity," but this should by no means be taken as a sign that they

oppose a deal with Trump. Canadian nationalism, and its twin, Quebec separatism, have served for decades as ideological weapons in the hands of the country's imperialist bourgeoisie to keep workers across North America divided, while securing Canada's place as American imperialism's junior partner in its wars of plunder and conquest around the world. Trudeau, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, and the union leaderships want above all to continue this alliance under Trump. This is why the union-backed Trudeau government adopted a \$1.3 billion package to enforce Trump-style measures at the Canada-US border, and why all parties in parliament want to hike military spending to at least 2 percent of GDP and participate in imperialist wars the world over.

The United Steelworkers, which counts over 1 million members across North America, including 225,000 in Canada, amplified in a statement from International President David McCall the readiness of the union bureaucracy to stand in the front rank of a trade war against China: "Canada has proven itself time and again to be one of our strongest partners when it comes to national security, and our economies are deeply integrated.

"The key to eliminating unfair competition, confronting global overcapacity in crucial sectors, and stemming the flow of unfairly traded products making their way into North America is targeted tariffs on countries that violate our trade laws and greater coordination with our trusted allies—not sweeping actions that undermine crucial relationships."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has made clear that workers should decisively reject all efforts to corral them behind the competing interests of the American and Canadian bourgeoisies in the present trade war. As we wrote Monday,

They should dismiss with contempt the rival phony claims of Trump and Trudeau that they are fighting for "American" and "Canadian" jobs, and declare with one voice, "This is not our war and we will not be made to pay for it."

They must join forces in a united movement of the North American working class, through the development of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. These committees will organize opposition to the demands of the ruling class for "sacrifices" in the form of mass job cuts, concessions and the evisceration of public services and social programs.

Opposition to trade war and its ruinous impacts on the working class must be infused with a socialist internationalist program, key tenets of which are opposition to imperialist war and anti-immigrant chauvinism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact