

# Canada and US hockey players brawl amid nationalist furor over Trump's trade war

**James Clayton**  
**17 February 2025**

The brawl that erupted between Canadian and American hockey players Saturday night, just seconds after the puck dropped at a "Four Nations" tournament match, and the enthusiasm with which it has been greeted by sections of the capitalist media are deeply disturbing. They are indicative of the extent to which popular culture is being infected with the foul nationalism that is being whipped up by the capitalist elite and its political representatives on both sides of the 49th parallel.

Amid US President Donald Trump's threats to impose sweeping tariffs on Canada and use "economic force to make it the 51st state" and the Canadian ruling elite's vows of retaliatory tariffs and flag-waving exhortations to "save Canada," the political, media and cultural establishments are egging on the most reactionary displays of nationalist bile.

Just two seconds into the Four Nations match at Montreal's Bell Centre, the USA's Matthew Tkachuk and Canada's Brandon Hagel spent 20 seconds trading blows before falling onto the ice, where they continued wrestling with each other. Moments later, just after the second puck drop and with just three seconds off the game clock, Brady Tkachuk (brother to Matthew) and Sam Bennett began to brawl. A third fight erupted between the USA's JT Miller and Canada's Colin Parayko in the game's ninth second.

The largely Canadian, mostly affluent crowd (an average ticket cost \$260 USD) was shown on ESPN roaring its approval and pumping its fists in the air at the gladiatorial spectacle. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the far-right leader of the official opposition Conservatives, Pierre Poilievre, were among those in the audience.

Minutes before the three fights, the crowd booed loudly the singing of the Star-Spangled Banner, the US national anthem. Crowds have booed the anthem at professional sports games in Canada since last month.

The chorus of Canadian boos and jeers was cited by the US players as a trigger for their contribution to the violent outburst. Asked for his reaction to the boos during the post-game, Matthew Tkachuk replied, "I didn't like it, and that's all I got to say."

By contrast, the media positively reveled in the disgusting spectacle. The CBC, Canada's state-funded broadcaster, featured an edited video clip with all three fights conveniently included prominently in its article on the game. The article reported enthusiastically, "After legendary MMA fighter Georges St-Pierre introduced the home side and the deafening Bell Centre crowd once again lustily booed the American national anthem before belting out 'O Canada' in full voice before puck drop, forward Brandon Hagel and U.S. counterpart Matthew Tkachuk fought 2 seconds into the first period."

The CBC went on to cite Bennett, a participant in the second fight,

who declared, "It's not many times you get to suit up and fight for your country. Just a couple of guys that wanted to go to battle."

The promotion of such backward sentiments, for which the players are by no means chiefly responsible, underscores the real dangers confronting the North American and international working class. As American imperialism seeks to ruthlessly assert its interests against opponents and "friends" alike by means of trade war, other types of "economic pressure" and outright military force, the Canadian imperialists are resorting to nationalist jingoism and militarism. In so doing, they aim to poison the political and cultural climate to prevent the working class from unifying internationally in opposition to capitalist austerity and war, and to whip up a foul "patriotic" furor among sections of the middle class and backward workers that can be manipulated to corral the population behind the ruling elite's policies of economic nationalism and imperialist war.

The Four Nations tournament is supposed to provide a unique opportunity to see the best hockey players in the world, as opposed to bare knuckle boxing talent. It features teams from Canada, the USA, Finland and Sweden, whose top players are playing against each other for the first time in a decade, since the NHL, the premier North American professional hockey league, for profit reasons has not allowed its players to compete in the Olympics since 2014.

The NHL and its media sponsors have made a point of excluding Russia—long one of the top hockey nations in the world and home to dozens of NHLers—from the Four Nations tournament, in a reactionary show of support for the NATO-instigated Ukraine war.

The regular resort of hockey players to fisticuffs, itself a disturbing element of the game's commercialization, is nothing new. But something here *is* new. Firstly, the outbreak of three fights within nine seconds of the first puck drop is unprecedented—all the more so at a major international tournament. These fights obviously did not arise out of the play of the game, as is typically the case. The players were primed to fight.

They were primed by the extraordinary atmosphere of inter-imperialist threats and nationalist jingoism being whipped up by both the US and Canadian ruling classes—against each other—as the imperialist states compete to re-divide the world for their own benefit.

It is this foul atmosphere of threats of annexations and of countermeasures that polluted the Bell Centre, giving the players the social permission to act out on the ice the descent into social barbarism which is being pursued by their respective ruling classes on the world arena.

It was "America First" vs "Canada First" fought out at centre ice.

Last week, the fascist Trump imposed 25 percent tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum products effective March 12. This came just days

after he announced his threat of a 25 percent tariff on all Canadian goods would be “paused” for 30 days, while Washington and Ottawa haggle over the White House’s demands for a new “economic framework” with Canada. The tariffs threaten hundreds of thousands of Canadian and US workers with layoffs and tens of millions with higher prices, as they do workers in Mexico, which is also in Trump’s tariff war crosshairs.

The US trade war against what is ostensibly its closest ally, and against the rest of the world, has provided the Canadian ruling class with the occasion to whip up Canadian nationalism, in both its proudly right-wing and “left” varieties. Canada’s reactionary trade union bureaucracy has embraced this nationalist fervour with hand on heart, committing itself to “national unity” with the Canadian bourgeoisie.

The Bell Centre brawl occurred on Canada’s “Flag Day,” a date in the calendar that virtually nobody was aware of until this year. The 2025 event was ostensibly dedicated to marking the 60th anniversary of the first official raising of the “Maple Leaf” as Canada’s national flag. In 1965 it replaced the Canadian “Red Ensign,” which was patterned after a British flag, includes a Union Jack, and was adopted in 1892 when Canada was part of the British Empire. The event has not been widely celebrated in years previous. However, this year, competing sections of Canada’s ruling class exploited the occasion to burnish their patriotic credentials as the best and loudest defenders of the interests of Canadian imperialism faced with a threatened Trump-led American *Anschluss*.

The far-right leader of Canada’s federal Conservative Party, Pierre Poilievre, used Flag Day as an occasion to position himself as a red-blooded Canadian patriot, after more than a year campaigning on the slogan that “Canada is broken.” Poilievre gave a bellicose speech to a crowd of several hundred Conservative supporters in Ottawa, introducing “Canada First” as the party’s new slogan for the coming election campaign.

This is an openly fascistic appeal crafted after Trump’s “America First” and in the same vein as *Deutschland über alles*. It also, not coincidentally, borrows the name of a small Nazi group called “Canada First,” which is campaigning for the expulsion of all immigrants from Canada, and which regularly shares pictures of Adolf Hitler and antisemitic filth.

Poilievre is campaigning on a platform of partnership with the United States in its military adventures abroad, massive increases in Canadian military spending, the militarization of the Canada-US border, drastically curtailing immigration to 200,000 people per year, the criminalization of the vandalizing of Canadian historical monuments, forcing First Nations to accept resource extraction projects, massive tax cuts for the wealthy and the gutting of health and worker protection regulations in the name of “inter-provincial free trade.”

Canada’s governing Liberals, who are in the process of anointing the former central banker Mark Carney as leader, have easily adapted themselves to “Canada First” sentiments. Carney tweeted a picture of himself watching the Saturday night Four Nations hockey game with a look of obvious approval, but made no comment on its descent into fistfights. In a tweet the previous day, directed at Poilievre, Carney quipped that “No one who says Canada is broken will ever put Canada first.”

Canada’s trade union-supported NDP, which has propped up the Trudeau Liberal government for the past five years, has adapted itself to the rightward shift without a thought. At a Flag Day event at Toronto’s Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto Mayor Olivia Chow, the

widow of the late NDP leader Jack Layton, who presided over a significant shift of the party to the right two decades ago, led the event with the bellicose declaration that “We will never be the 51st state!” Along with Deputy Mayor Ausma Malik, Chow mouthed empty identity politics platitudes, declaring, “We come from different religions, cultures and backgrounds but Canadians have each other’s backs and are united by our love for our country.”

Chow is trading in the same fraud as Poilievre, but dressed up with a cheap amalgam of liberal nationalism and pseudo-left identity politics. Her aim is to anaesthetize the working class before the fascistic threat, which is clearly expressed by Trump, but is more fundamentally rooted in the global crisis of capitalism and the response to it of ruling elites in every country, including Canada.

Canadian workers are not “united” with the Canadian bourgeoisie, which enriches itself by ruthlessly exploiting them. Canadian capital plans to use nationalist flag-waving to cover up a dramatic acceleration of its Trump-style attack on workers’ social and democratic rights. The ruling class is whipping up nationalism and racist xenophobia to redirect the explosive social tensions of the class struggle outward, and to divide and confuse Canadian workers, pitting them against their natural allies—immigrants and workers in the US and other countries.

The vile display of savagery and thuggery on the ice at the Bell Centre, including the braying of the crowd, is a dramatic foreshadowing of the violence and brutality which Canadian capital is prepared to organize and unleash against the working class at home and the targets of imperialist aggression abroad.

Canadian workers must reject all forms of nationalist jingoism, including the kind that parades around in “left” drag, and unite in a movement for socialism with our Mexican and American class brothers and sisters. Our watchword must be: “Canadian, Mexican and American workers, unite! For class struggle, not tariffs and imperialist war!”



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