

Canada's unions mobilizing workers behind country's capitalist elite with nationalist trade-war propaganda

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The trade war US President Donald Trump has unleashed with his imposition of punishing tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico threatens the jobs and livelihoods of millions of workers across North America and beyond.

Canada's ruling class—furious at the disruption of its eight-decade-long partnership with American imperialism that has allowed Ottawa to pursue its imperialist interests around the world—has responded by promoting vile Canadian nationalism to keep the working class divided and conceal its drive to make workers pay for the crisis.

This political reality will not be changed by Thursday's decision by Trump to "pause" for a month 25 percent tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada that comply with the US-Mexico-Canada free trade agreement (USMCA). Initial reports indicate that over 60 percent of Canadian imports to the US will still be subject to a tariff because Washington deems they don't comply with USMCA, the replacement to NAFTA Trump himself negotiated during his first term.

The White House has also retained the 20 percent tariff on goods from China, which is the American oligarchy's main target, and Trump confirmed Thursday that 25 percent tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports, including from Canada, will go ahead on March 12 as planned.

Moreover, Trump has made clear that his trade war will continue as his administration seeks to reshore production to the United States in preparation for the waging of world war against US imperialism's main rivals. In his Tuesday address to the US Congress, America's fascist would-be dictator expounded at length on how a barrage of "reciprocal" tariffs and other trade war measures will be implemented April 2.

As Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau put it Thursday shortly before Trump's announcement of the latest tariff "pause," Canada will be engaged in a trade war with the US for "the foreseeable future."

Following Trump's latest calibration of his trade war plans, Ottawa announced that it will not lift the 25 percent tariff on C\$30 billion of US goods that it imposed on Tuesday in retaliation for Trump's tariffs. However, Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc did commit to delaying the start date for tariffs on goods worth a further \$125 billion from March 25 until April 2. Ontario Premier Doug Ford responded by saying that his plan to impose a 25 percent charge on energy exports to the US, which will above all hit American workers through electricity bill increases, will go ahead Monday as planned and remain in force until the threat of tariffs is over.

The key question facing workers in Canada, the US, and Mexico amid this flurry of back-and-forth announcements, is how can they intervene independently in the political situation and fight to secure their own interests? This is impossible in alliance with any of the contending bourgeois factions in the trade war. Trump speaks for a substantial section of the US oligarchy that thinks strengthening Washington's control over its "near abroad," and consolidating key production supply chains within its national borders are essential prerequisites for fighting a war with China to ensure US hegemony through a redivision of the world.

The Canadian bourgeoisie supports aggression and war to defend America's global predominance, but is angered that Trump does not recognize it as a junior partner in a US-led "Fortress North America," with privileged access to the American market. Hence Trudeau criticized Trump this week for engaging in a trade war with Ottawa while seeking to reach a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the heads of its traditional NATO allies—underscoring Canadian imperialism's commitment to the policy pursued by Biden and his predecessors of using Ukraine as a pawn to weaken, subjugate and plunder Russia. Ontario Premier Doug Ford, for his part, is campaigning for a "Fortress Am-Can" to oppose China.

New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh—whose party has propped up Trudeau's minority government for over five years with the blessing and encouragement of the trade unions, has called for Trump to be disinited from the G7 meeting in June to be hosted by Canada because he is "destabilizing the world," among other things.

On both sides of the Canada-US border, the union bureaucracies have taken the lead in peddling the "America First" and "Canadian First" nationalism required by their respective bourgeoisies to pursue their class interests. In the United States, this has included the admission by the United Auto Workers (UAW) that they are in "active negotiations" with the fascist Trump to shape his tariffs on auto imports and the absurd claim that tariffs are a "tool" that workers can use to fight back against decades of concessions. In Canada, the unions' "Canada First" campaign is characterized by a corporatist partnership with the most ruthless representatives of finance capital and the use of militarist-laden rhetoric to corral workers behind the push to uphold the interests of Canadian imperialism.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) issued a nationalist tirade Tuesday that far-right Tory leader Pierre Poilievre could have authored. The tariffs represented "an unprecedented attack on Canada and Canadian workers," the country's largest trade union federation declared. "This is a time for action. Canadians expect a strong and

decisive response that meets this attack with the full weight of our country's power. This is not a moment for half-measures or empty words. We must protect Canadian jobs and industries through retaliation and investments in our future."

In its bellicose tone, the statement corresponded entirely with the "economic call to arms" issued by Unifor President Lana Payne Monday. The head of Canada's largest private sector union, whose origins lie in the nationalist split from the United Autoworkers by the Canadian Auto Workers in 1985, asserted, "Every Canadian politician, business leader, worker and resident must fight back."

The "action" or "fight" proposed by the union bureaucracy is being coordinated with the most powerful sections of big business. The CLC and Unifor were involved in establishing the Canada-US Trade Council (CUSTC) in mid-January. Its members include the Business Council of Canada and Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and its co-chairs are the leaders of the Aluminium Association of Canada and Canadian Steel Producers Association.

These employers' association represent a ruling class that has more or less openly been agitating for months for the bringing to power of a Tory government under the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre to impose the kind of social onslaught on workers and public services that Trump himself would approve of. Poilievre stated this week that any money raised through tariffs should be used to fund tax cuts, i.e., major windfalls for big business and the rich, not aid to laid off workers. He added, "We must not allow politicians to dishonestly use this crisis to once again launch a debt-fuelled, money-printing spending spree that will drive up inflation."

Addressing the "millions" of workers it fraudulently claims to represent, the CLC's statement concluded, "What makes us Canadian is our unwavering belief in the collective—that we take care of each other, that no one gets left behind. Now more than ever, we must live those values."

This statement says everything one needs to know about the smug, self-satisfied union bureaucracy that has emerged as a privileged section of the upper-middle class over the past 40 years through the devastation of workers' jobs and living standards. For most workers in Canada, recent decades have taught them that for the ruling class "Canadian values" mean low wages, precarious employment, concession-filled contracts imposed with the complicity of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracies, strike bans, the gutting of public services, glaring social inequality, and never-ending imperialist wars.

The nationalist propaganda being spewed out by the union bureaucracies and their pseudo-left appendages aims to cover up this reality under a flood of lies about "national unity," "Team Canada," and the "common interests" between Canadian capitalists and workers. As an article in *Jacobin* magazine, the mouthpiece of the Democratic Socialists of America, put it, now is the time for a "common front—including Liberals, social democrats, democratic socialists and others—to build a popular democratic project for a more sovereign Canada."

Such a "common front" has already existed for decades in the form of the union/New Democratic Party/Liberal alliance, and it has succeeded only in smothering the class struggle and facilitating the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society. Its record can be traced from the suppression of the mass movement against the austerity policies of Mike Harris' Tory government in Ontario during the 1990s, through the channeling of opposition to the Harper federal Conservative government behind Trudeau's pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals in 2015, to the sabotaging of a major strike

wave that has swept across all economic sectors and parts of Canada since late 2021. The "common front" of Liberal and NDP politicians, and union bureaucrats has overseen the decimation of public spending, including health care and social programs, an onslaught on workers' rights, including the virtual banning of the right to strike, and massive military rearmament.

During the unfolding trade war, the union bureaucracies want in partnership with the ruling class to intensify the decades-long onslaught on the working class, forcing it to pay for the capitalist crisis. No less importantly, their promotion of nationalist poison is aimed at preparing public opinion to rally behind the shooting wars that invariably arise out of trade war, as the history of the 1930s testifies.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted in a recent article on the trade war,

Workers across North America cannot defend their jobs or fight for their interests by backing any of the ruling-class factions engaged in this trade war. Rejecting the unions' efforts to pit workers against each other along nationalist lines, American, Canadian, and Mexican workers, whose daily activities on the job are already linked in a unified cross-border production process, must wage a common struggle to defend the jobs, living standards, and social and democratic rights of all workers. To do so, they must build independent organizations of class struggle—rank-and-file committees—that correspond to the objective social position of workers as a class that owes no allegiance to any capitalist nation-state. This fight must be fused with the mounting opposition in the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to put an end to capitalism, the root cause of trade warfare and imperialist war.



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