

“Workers in North America and the whole world are so incredibly integrated and productive, we are our own natural allies”

Workers in Canada speak out against Trump’s trade war and the Canadian elite’s nationalist response

Our reporter
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US President Donald Trump intensified his trade war against the world this week by imposing 25 percent tariffs on steel and aluminium imports. The levy hit Canada and Mexico particularly hard, underscoring that Washington has all but abrogated the US-Mexico-Canada free trade agreement.

Trump’s tariffs threaten tens of thousands of jobs across North America. They are aimed at economically weakening Washington’s northern neighbour to prepare the way for Canada’s annexation as the 51st state of the US.

The close connection between Trump’s global trade war and the waging of imperialist war around the world to secure American imperialist hegemony was underlined Thursday, when the president reiterated his pledge to annex Canada. “Canada only works as a state,” Trump asserted. “We don’t need anything they have. As a state it would be one of the great states...” Referring to the Canada-US border, he added, “If you look at a map they drew a line right through it...a straight artificial line...makes no sense.”

Like Hitler’s “Anschluss” (joining) of Austria with Nazi Germany prior to World War II, Trump wants to gain control of America’s “near abroad” so he can better pursue economic and military conflict with America’s global enemies, above all China. The Canadian ruling class “opposes” Trump because he is at present refusing to accept Canadian imperialism as a junior partner in “fortress North America,” which Ottawa wants to use to pursue its own global imperialist interests.

The opposition among workers to Trump’s trade war is of a fundamentally different character. As indicated in comments from workers in the steel and energy sectors to the *World Socialist Web Site*, it is driven by their fight to defend their jobs and living standards. As one energy industry worker from Alberta put it, “Workers in North America and the whole world are so incredibly integrated and productive, we are our own natural allies against these capitalist elites who are so willing to cast us all onto the streets or into war to defend the profits that we produce.”

Trump enforced a 25 percent tariff on all Canadian and Mexican imports March 4, prompting retaliatory tariffs by the Trudeau Liberal government of 25 percent on C\$30 billion of American imports. Two days later, Trump agreed to pause for almost a month the tariffs on

goods deemed by Washington to comply with the US-Mexico-Canada agreement, the successor to NAFTA. This move left tariffs in place for about 60 percent of Canadian imports to the US. Ottawa has insisted on keeping its retaliatory tariffs in place until Trump removes all current tariffs and drops the threat of future levies.

Instead, Trump upped the ante with the imposition Wednesday of a further 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminium imports. Although this tariff applies to imports from all countries, it hits Canada particularly hard, since the country accounts for about 60 percent of US aluminium imports and a significant portion of steel imports. The Canadian government answered with a 25 percent tariff on American steel and aluminium, cast iron products, computers, and other goods worth C\$29.8 billion.

Trump is threatening a further 25 percent tariff on auto imports on April 2, as well as so-called “reciprocal” tariffs on all imports to the US that would begin the same day. Should these tariffs go ahead, or if Trump allows the suspended tariffs to come back into force, Ottawa has pledged to answer with tariffs on an additional C\$100-125 billion of goods. Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said Wednesday, “The excuse for these tariffs shift every day. The only constant seems to be President Trump’s talks of annexing our country through economic coercion.”

Tariffs are a charge paid by the importer on goods from the affected country. Importers can either respond by passing the extra cost along to consumers in the form of price increases or cancelling the order. In the first case, workers pay the price through inflation, in the second, with their jobs.

Even the threat of Trump’s tariffs already claimed thousands of jobs across Canada. In early January, the WSWS published a statement from the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee condemning the layoff of about two-thirds of the plant’s 1,400-strong workforce due to a sudden drop in orders from the US in late 2024.

A worker from the plant told the WSWS this week that most workers have since been called back. However, they added,

Problems for members started almost right off the bat as the company was extremely late in getting Records of

Employment (ROE's) to Service Canada so members could file for unemployment payments. Some members were waiting for up to 6 weeks (through the holidays) to get an Employment Insurance (EI) cheque.

Members who worked until Friday December 20th were entitled to be paid for Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and New Year's Day regardless of layoff, according to the terms of the collective agreement.

Many did not get paid in the second week of January when they expected to. It would have been approximately \$600.

The worker in the energy sector reported similar concerns, commenting,

I'm in the completions section of the Alberta oil and gas industry, where wells are prepared for production. Modern horizontal wells take millions of dollars to bring to production. If there is any uncertainty about demand, if contracts can't be secured for new production, drilling and completions can come to a screeching halt very quickly. I expect to be out of work any day now.

The oil here is considered "domestic" by US policy makers, so Donald Trump's idea of making Canada the 51st state isn't as big a leap as you might think. I can't predict what form it will take, but the control they want will eventually require a massive effort to discipline and pacify Canadian oil and gas workers, along with the Canadian working class as a whole.

Due to the cross-border integration of the auto and other manufacturing industries in North America, the trade war threatens to be especially devastating. Components used in manufacturing often cross borders multiple times during the production process, compounding the tariff rate that producers would have to pay. Industry representatives have warned that the auto industry in Canada could shut down in a matter of days if Trump's promised tariffs are applied to its products.

Canada's trade union bureaucracy is trying to persuade workers that they can defend their interests in alliance with Canadian imperialism. Leading union representatives, including the presidents of Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), have joined the Canadian Council—a corporatist body including employer associations and Liberal government ministers responsible for strikebreaking.

The latest statement from the CLC appealed to Prime Minister Mark Carney, who took office March 14 as the successor to Justin Trudeau, to "protect workers from job losses and uncertainty." This appeal to a wealthy former central banker and Goldman Sachs executive, who has shifted even further to the right than the warmonger, strike breaker and austerity imposer Trudeau, shows the bankruptcy of the union bureaucracy.

Whether the government is led by Carney or Tory leader Pierre Poilievre following the impending federal election, its main goal will be to intensify the onslaught on the working class to make sure it pays for trade war and imperialist war.

As the worker in the energy sector emphasized, workers across North America have common interests in the struggle to defend their jobs and living standards against the capitalists' trade war. Asked if

he had a message for American workers, he responded,

Recently two Detroit children died while sheltering in their family's car. Their mother is clearly a hard-working woman, but she couldn't make her rent in an exploding cost of living crisis.

Workers already bear the full cost of this crisis; a tariff war will only amplify our struggle. In terms of energy, the best example of North American integration is Ontario and Quebec electricity going south into the eastern US. The second-best example is the natural gas I help produce in Alberta going south into the western US. One of these big pipelines runs right through the farm I grew up on. It's enraging that with all the hard work I do in Canada, nothing can be found to keep children warm in their homes in winter, but billions can be found to burn Ukraine and Palestine to the ground.

The widespread anger among workers in the face of the exploding cost of living and the threat of layoffs produced by the capitalist crisis and trade war must be directed by a political perspective and organized to mobilize the immense social power of the working class. As the WSWS has repeatedly stressed, workers must unify their struggles across North America and internationally. We wrote March 4,

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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