

# Canada: What the Left can learn from the “Freedom Convoy”

Monday 14 February 2022, by [JACKSON Emma](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2022).

## **Defeating the growth of the far-right means acknowledging real grievances and countering their narrative with an inclusive left-wing populism**

Three years ago, the last time a large group of truckers rolled into Ottawa, I found myself on Parliament Hill locked in a standoff.

I had traveled to the capital from Edmonton a week earlier for a youth climate justice convergence. The morning after it ended, I joined a demonstration against the United We Roll Yellow Vest Convoy, at one of the same intersections currently being occupied by the Freedom Convoy.

Their trucks had signs that read “No Migration, No U.N.” and “Open Borders Breed Chaos.” We carried hand banners that read “No One Is Illegal.”

After being shoved by a white man in his 50s into the grille guard of a semi-trailer, I ended up on one side of a police barricade, face-to-face with another man from Red Deer who was wearing a “Make Canada Great Again” hat.

“Trudeau shouldn’t be letting in migrants while I struggle to pay my bills,” he screamed at me.

I yelled back: “I came here from Alberta and I hate Trudeau too.”

He froze, staring at me incredulously.

Standing across from him, it was clear. We both understood the system was rigged against us, but we had been organized into radically different understandings of how it was rigged—and, more importantly, what was to be done about it.

The Freedom Convoy that arrived in Ottawa this past weekend isn’t the first time white supremacists and neo-Nazis have mobilized under the guise of more popular grievances in order to further their agendas—it’s been a long time coming.

In many ways, it’s a battle between two visions, and the power and organizing behind them.

In the story of that man from Red Deer, punching down was the way we can make change for the better. Migrants and Indigenous peoples, he figured, were responsible for his struggle to find stable work and his inability to save for his daughter’s university tuition.

My story tells me we should punch up. The corporate elite and their political allies in government, from where I stand, are knowingly torching my generation’s future to continue lining the pockets of a billionaire class.

His story points to hardened borders, low taxes, and “small government” as solutions. Mine turns to

universal public programs, repatriating land to Indigenous peoples, and worker control over all aspects of our economy.

One problem, two very different destinations.

### **From the Yellow Vest movement to the Freedom Convoy**

The Freedom Convoy is entering Day Six of its occupation of downtown Ottawa. It's obvious that for those three years, the Right has been leveraging widely-held anti-government sentiment exacerbated by COVID-19. They have tested messages and recruited an ever-growing number of people into their own story of how the system is rigged.

The anti-vaccine and anti-mandate movement in Canada has direct ties to the Yellow Vest Movement. As Kurt Philips, board member of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network and founder of Anti-Racist Canada, [told \*Canada's National Observer\*](#), "Every single prominent Yellow Vester that I'm aware of is now an anti-vaxxer."

It's not hard to see what the two movements share in common. Similar to the Yellow Vest Movement, the anti-mandate and anti-vaccine movement in Canada has been fuelled by economic deprivation, anti-government sentiment, distrust in mainstream science, and resentment against a liberal elite and their allies in the mainstream media. It has also become deeply entangled with white supremacist and far-right organizations.

And while many claim that those affiliated with the far-right are among the minority, they are nevertheless at the core of the movement—organizing under the banner of "rights and freedoms" in order to tap into more broadly held grievances and expand their base.

However, unlike the Yellow Vest Convoy which largely failed to resonate beyond disaffected workers in the Prairies, there's no denying that the Freedom Convoy has been incredibly effective at attracting broad public support. Hundreds of people have flocked to highway overpasses to wave at the trucks below, entire mutual aid networks have cropped up in small towns and rural communities to keep the drivers fed, and the GoFundMe campaign, created to resource the movement, is now nearing \$10 million in donations, and their Facebook groups have well over 600,000 members at the latest count.

Many of us have spent the past few days alarmed by the sheer number of friends, family, and community members we know who are strongly expressing their support for the convoy.

Of course, this anti-mandate movement has been helped along the way by a right-wing media amplification machine; wall-to-wall mainstream media coverage; and a sympathetic police force that appears to be spending more time giving thumbs up to protesters on TikTok than issuing tickets for infractions.

But despite all these enabling factors, there's also no denying that much of what we're witnessing is the result of effective organizing and movement-building. And while it's easy and tempting to dismiss this movement as a "fringe minority," as Trudeau has tried, anyone familiar with social movement theory knows that with enough determination, it only takes a 'fringe minority' to change the course of history.

What we're currently witnessing is a troubling sign that COVID-19 could become a generational-defining moment of politicization for the Right— radicalizing tens of thousands who are disaffected by the system and directing them straight into the welcoming arms of the far-right.

If we're to stand any chance of stemming the rise of fascism in this country, we have to take the anti-mandate movement seriously enough to recognize the many lessons it's offering us in order to out-organize it.

## **What the right is getting right**

Whether we want to admit it or not, there's a lot that the anti-mandate movement is getting right from an organizing and movement-building perspective.

For starters, in stark contrast to the Left, the past few days have revealed how much better the Right is at meeting people where they're at.

Instead of building an [insular movement](#) restricted to people who agree with each other 93 per cent of the time, the Right has successfully tapped into widely held resentment and built a mass on-ramp for people with highly divergent views. It's why the Freedom Convoy isn't just being ardently defended by white supremacists on Rebel News, but also by anti-vaccine Green Party supporters in the inboxes of mainstream environmental organizations.

One of the outcomes of living through late-stage capitalism and COVID-19 has been an overwhelming breakdown of community and social fabric. People desperately want to be a part of something bigger than themselves and the anti-mandate movement is openly extending them that opportunity without requiring that they belong to an activist subculture.

In fact, I'd venture a guess that if you had walked around Parliament Hill last Saturday and asked those with the convoy whether they considered themselves to be "activists," the vast majority would have shrugged and said, "I'm a regular person fighting for my freedom."

In the anti-mandate movement, everyone's participation is welcome. Of course, this also extends to participants brandishing yellow star pins, thin blue line badges, and flags with swastikas—a level of acceptance that should never be tolerated.

But the degree to which thousands are willing to come to the defense of the movement the second its racist and antisemitic elements are exposed—insisting that they're just a "few bad apples"—is telling. It proves their commitment to building and defending the biggest possible "we," against the smallest possible "them"—in this case, the liberal establishment, mainstream media, and those of us naïve enough to be under the spell of both.

It's also evidence of their collective disdain for any whiff of social elitism—something that is likely only being exacerbated by the urban left's impulse to wag our fingers at these "[backward, selfish people](#)."

For the Right, "meeting people where they're at" has in many cases literally meant meeting people where they are, in the everyday spaces they inhabit.

In order to actively and constantly be recruiting everyday working people into your base (i.e. build power), you actually have to talk to them and ground your recruitment in the everyday institutions and networks they belong to. It's obvious that the anti-mandate and anti-vaccine crowd is doing just that by engaging in one-on-one conversations with their neighbors, co-workers, and complete strangers, and listening to their collective grievances.

But the anti-mandate movement isn't just recruiting participants one-by-one, they're also successfully bringing entire institutions into the movement and providing them with opportunities to visibly show their support. They've successfully recruited evangelical churches, private trucker

associations, and far-right outlets like Rebel News, all of whom are fueling the movement—whether by distributing ham sandwiches at rest stops or amplifying their message to hundreds of thousands of people on YouTube.

The Right also isn't just organizing people into a broad, amorphous movement. Many of them are building organizations and pulling people directly into an expansive far-right social media machine capable of further radicalizing them.

The Right is also effectively wielding polarization as a political tool. While many see it as a bad thing, polarization is how movements grow their base: by forcing people to choose a side. Social movements bridge divides between some groups, but they also intentionally drive wedges and expand divides between others. As Gene Sharp, a theoretician of the dynamics of conflict, writes, "the start of public demonstrations will almost always sharpen the conflict, cause the conflicting groups to become more sharply delineated, and stimulate previously uncommitted people to take sides."

It's not uncommon for the majority of the public to be turned off by a movement's tactics, which have to be disruptive and confrontational if they're going to fulfill the purpose of sparking a moral crisis. But what does matter—and what we all ought to be paying attention to—is whether, even while pleading for peace and reason, ever-growing numbers of people express sympathy with the cause itself.

If it's not carefully wielded, however, polarization can backfire on a movement. For it to work effectively, movements need to ensure that they're pulling in more active supporters than their opponents. And while it's too soon to tell exactly how things will shake out in the case of the convoy, it seems highly likely that the greatest beneficiary of this will be Justin Trudeau and the Liberal government.

### **We can't defuse their anger, we have to redirect it**

People have responded to the convoy, and its sympathizers, in all kinds of ways over the past week.

Many have tried to ignore them. This strategy doesn't hold for long in a mainstream media context providing them with wall-to-wall coverage.

Others have attempted to ridicule, dismiss or shame them— all approaches that have arguably backfired by fueling their narrative of "brainwashed liberal elites looking down on them."

Perhaps the most troubling response has been the speed at which people have unfriended, unfollowed, or blocked their friends and family who have expressed even the shallowest support for the convoy. While people are under absolutely no obligation to be on the receiving end of hate and vitriol, we're never going to out-organize the far-right by cutting ourselves off from the same social base they're actively recruiting from.

To be clear, we can't reason with hardened white supremacists— we can only isolate them. But we can, and must, directly engage those who are more broadly identifying with the anti-mandate movement.

Fortunately, there are still many people remaining who, instead of dismissing, blocking, or ignoring them, are actively trying to engage the sympathizers and supporters in their own lives.

A lot of them have leaned on science— attempting to reason with anti-mandate supporters by bringing in medical facts about vaccines, and numbers on hospital bed capacity.

But much like climate politics, our response to people opposed to government-imposed COVID-19 mandates can't just be about "knowledge" and the belief or refusal of science. It's naïve to assume at this point that if we simply better "communicate" the science, we can effectively diffuse people's anger, and strengthen support for vaccines and public health mandates.

Instead, we have to learn from what the Right is doing successfully. We have to listen to their story about power and control, and counter it with a more compelling story of our own.

People have every reason to be angry. They know the system is rigged against them. It's up to us to tell a new story of how it's rigged— one that doesn't scapegoat Jews, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and racialized folks, but instead unites us across our divisions and turns us collectively against those at the very top who are raking in billions off our backs.

A lot of this is easier said than done. Of course.

I've spent the past week placing myself back at that police barricade from 2019, standing across from the Yellow Vester in the "Make Canada Great Again" hat, trying to imagine what the equivalent way to disarm people in this moment is. And the truth is, I don't think there are any easy answers.

But I can't help but wonder what would happen if, instead of trying to diffuse people's rage, we attempted to redirect it?

What if we told them that we're angry too?

We're angry and we're tired.

We're angry at a system that has left us overworked and underpaid. We're angry at the pharmaceutical CEOs that care more about funneling billions into their offshore tax havens, than they do about vaccinating millions of people and stopping this ever-mutating virus.

We're angry at the decades of government-led austerity that have left our ICUs overwhelmed and under-resourced.

We're angry that Justin Trudeau somehow found the money to give airport authorities [rent relief on their planes](#), while thousands of people were being evicted from their homes.

We're angry that, while we lost our jobs, Canada's 100 highest-paid CEOs [walked away](#) with an average \$95,000 extra dollars in their pockets last year.

We're angry that [migrant farm workers](#) in this country are being left to die in isolation.

We're angry that [Loblaws](#) made \$400 million in profit, and yet claims that it can't afford to continue paying their workers an extra \$2 an hour.

We're angry that our governments can hand [\\$18 billion dollars](#) to oil and gas companies during a climate emergency, but still somehow can't afford to provide every Indigenous community with safe drinking water.

And we're tired too.

We're tired of being told that we can't eat with four friends in our own dining room but we can if we go to a crowded public restaurant. We're tired of being told that we can't leave our homes unless it's to go to work. And if we do work from home, we're tired of working our meaningless, bullshit jobs

that make no sense as the world crumbles beneath us.

But we're also tired of people not recognizing that our lives are *deeply interdependent*, and that their choices are not just their own. As Mia Mingus [tells us](#), interdependence is the only moral and humane way to frame this pandemic. "Interdependence acknowledges that our survival is bound up together, that we are interconnected and what you do impacts others."

And here's the thing: recognizing our interdependence and rejecting those who seek to divide us is also the only way we can build a force strong enough to defeat those at the very top.

This, I believe, is the story we need to tell. And it's the only story powerful enough to defeat the creeping rise of fascism we're currently witnessing.

### **Lessons and next steps for an expansive left populism**

The left so far hasn't been able to tell a story that resonates widely and channels working class outrage in a way that moves us toward a compelling vision for the future. But failure, unfortunately, is not an option.

Here are some factors that could make the next attempts more successful.

Let's talk about the hollowing out of the labour movement and how, in turning away from deeply organizing its membership it is, in part, to blame for the flourishing of right-populist narrative. These days, the leadership of many unions are far more concerned about [striking backroom deals](#) with multibillion dollar corporations than they are about rebuilding militant resistance among working people.

No digital petition—no matter how well-written or how frequently boosted—will stem the rise of the far-right or prevent conservatives' most ruthless cuts to public services. Efforts to connect and strategize around building an organized, fighting labour movement need greater numbers and strategic support.

Labour's institutional heft is unparalleled, but those of us belonging to other movement threads—climate justice, anti-racism, Indigenous solidarity— must also reflect on how it is that the far-right is doing a better job of recruiting our own family, friends, and co-workers into their movements, than we are into our own.

Insularity has prevented the left from reaching the mainstream. We have an opportunity to examine our tendency to build organizations that feel more like [exclusive clubs](#) for the "already woke," than they do welcoming spaces for political education and transformation where people feel deeply valued and needed.

Jonathan Smucker [reminds](#) us: "Politics is not a clubhouse. Politics is messy. It is meeting everyday people where they are. It's not an enclave. It's not being the enlightened, 'super-woke' people together, learning a special vocabulary, shaking our heads and wagging our finger at all these backward other people. That is a manifestation of the same social elitism that is actively structured by neoliberal society. Instead, politics needs to be woven into the fabric of all of our lives."

Educational systems with middle class frameworks have spent years solely defining racism and white supremacy as being about individual behaviors and attributes, rather than about the distribution of power within social and economic structures. This dynamic backed us into an identity trap of our own making, where racialized people supporting the convoy are able to neutralize the claim that it's boosting white supremacist forces.

Ricardo Levins Morales [explains](#): “[anti-racism] is about putting your shoulder to the wheel of history; about undermining the structural supports of a system of control that grinds us under that keeps us divided even against ourselves and that extracts wealth, power and life from our communities like an oil company sucks it from the earth.”

Finally, the current leadership of the NDP will not recognize the populist moment we’re living in and respond accordingly, and dunking on them for often refusing to work on our behalf is probably a waste of time.

As painful as it is to admit, the NDP’s shortcomings are partly ours: electoral vehicles will only move as far and fast as the engine of movements propelling them. This doesn’t mean there are no criticisms to be made about the vehicle itself, but our endless critique won’t compel it to fix itself—only our power will.

It’s up to us to build strong, messy, and imperfect multiracial, working-class-centred movements for social and economic justice. And it’s up to us to write new stories and craft new visions of the world we deserve. Only a Left populist movement can defeat the rise of the far-right, and only we can build it.

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**P.S.**

The Breach

<https://breachmedia.ca/what-the-left-can-learn-from-the-freedom-convoy/>