

Fascism is as Canadian as the Maple Leaf

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The “Freedom Convoy” is the biggest protest organized by the Canadian far right since the 1930s. It swarmed Ottawa with reactionary exuberance, waving Nazi, Confederate, Gadsden, Red Ensign, and Maple Leaf flags, issuing threats of violence against opponents, and dreaming of recuperating a mythologized lost Canada. While the politics of this movement remain fluid, they’re recognizable as the politics of the far right: a continuum that includes fascists and those who occupy the space between fascists and mainstream conservatives, with a more aggressively racist, colonial, transphobic, anti-union, and anti-liberal politics than the mainstream is willing to openly endorse.

The resurgence of the far right is not an aberration for Canada, something unexpected, inexplicable, or inconsistent with Canadian history. It also cannot be reduced to the pandemic, bound to disappear when mask and vaccine mandates do. The far right’s growth is, rather, what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci described as a “morbid symptom” of our time’s deep capitalist crisis, which was augmented by the pandemic but began before it. Far-right organizers will undoubtedly be emboldened by the scale and commitment of the convoy movement and will seek to build on it both electorally and in the streets. These developments also mean an escalating danger for the targets of the far right’s vitriol and authoritarian fantasies: people of colour, Indigenous people, queer and trans people, and anyone willing to fight for a socially just world. How the left responds to these developments will play a decisive role in shaping how this new period unfolds. So it’s incumbent on us to understand how we got here.

The rebirth of fascism in the Canadian state

The Great Recession of 2008 – the biggest global crisis of capitalist accumulation since the 1930s – evolved into a long economic downturn with weak profitability for capital, which translated into heightened precarity for workers and the petty bourgeoisie (the classical Marxist term for the “middle class” between large capitalists and workers, including small business owners, middle management types, professionals, and members of the military). This crisis, combined with state-sponsored Islamophobia accompanying the War on Terror and white supremacist reaction against the Black Lives Matter movement, helped set the stage for the resurgence of the far right in North America and Europe.

In the United States, this resurgence has included fascist paramilitaries asserting their power on the street, most recently during 2020’s rebellions in defence of Black lives and the January 6 Capitol riot; it has been enabled, in part, by Donald Trump and many of his followers inside and outside the Republican Party. The far right has also developed a significant political footprint in France, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Germany, the UK, Sweden, and Finland, among other European countries – pulling mainstream conservative parties to the right. In India, the far right has become a dominant political force under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is [connected to fascist paramilitary organizations](#). Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters, meanwhile, reflect a significant far-right restoration in Brazil.

Compared to its equivalents in many other parts of the world, the far right in Canada did not initially find much purchase in the years after 2008. As Geoff McCormack and Thom Workman have shown in their book *The Servant State: Overseeing Capital Accumulation in Canada*, the severity of Canada's economic crisis of the early 1990s, greater than that in the US and Europe, meant the subsequent capitalist recovery in the 1990s and early 2000s generated sufficient levels of profitability to serve as a cushion in 2008. The volatility that fed into the growth of the far right in other parts of the world was simply not experienced on the same scale in Canada. As Donald Trump used the platform provided by his electoral run and presidency for his racist, xenophobic, nationalist vitriol, and American fascist forces started gaining a higher public profile, a brief window opened in which far-right organizations like the Soldiers of Odin, the Proud Boys, ID Canada, and La Meute were able to begin mobilizing more visibly in Canadian cities. A key feature shaping the Canadian far right at this point, like its equivalents elsewhere, was its extreme, conspiratorial Islamophobia – the legacy of Canada's participation in the War on Terror and post-9/11 security laws de facto targeting Muslims. But outside of Québec, these rallies never really grew beyond several dozen people. By 2018 this far-right wave had largely ebbed, with the notable exception of the [United We Roll convoy](#) in early 2019.

But even though Canada was spared the worst aspects of the capitalist crisis in 2008, underlying contradictions were nevertheless present. [The rate of profit had been declining, and the mass of profit stagnant](#), since before 2008. As a result, rates of accumulation – that is, for example, investment in new technology, machinery, and other equipment – were (and remain) weak. Inevitably, these contradictions began to deepen, particularly after the collapse of oil prices in 2014. Canada has been in a period of prolonged economic sluggishness over the last several years. While some sections of capital have absolutely benefited from a pandemic-induced spike in profits, the wider trend of weak profitability persists. Prior to the pandemic, the employment rate and real wage growth were anemic. Corporate and household debt in Canada were steadily rising. They now rank among the highest in the world.

The government's pandemic spending and the Bank of Canada's [quantitative easing](#) program have kept many businesses and households afloat that would otherwise have sunk. Despite the sharp economic contraction induced by state-mandated business closures ("lockdowns") in 2020, insolvencies are 30 percent below pre-pandemic levels. Yet Canadian capitalism faces serious uncertainty, particularly as the effects of the pandemic may outlast the pandemic period, and this uncertainty will continue to be experienced most severely by workers and the petty bourgeoisie. Larger capitalists are also squeezed in such moments and some will not survive the reckoning. But with their economies of scale and relatively advantageous position in transnational supply chains, they are better able than their smaller counterparts to maintain access to inventory and supplies; buy the most advanced technologies to increase productivity (that is, to accumulate capital); seek out foreign markets to help restore profitability; readjust the terms of their borrowing; and eat into the market share of weaker (often smaller) competitors.

The petty bourgeoisie was hit hard by the pandemic and drew heavily from the [Canadian Emergency Business Account](#), which offered interest-free loans to small businesses; the transportation sector, notably, was one of the biggest users of this fund, borrowing at a rate double its contribution to GDP. Three-quarters of indebted small businesses are concerned they [will never be able to pay off their debts](#). The survival strategies available to the petty bourgeoisie are more limited than those at the disposal of its larger counterparts, and the precariousness of the petty-bourgeois class position can feed a rage that gets directed at anything that seems to make it even more uncertain, whether that be workers fighting pay cuts; the predatory behaviour of small businesses' multinational competitors; the special treatment of big corporations by government; burdensome regulations and taxes; or pandemic restrictions that larger companies are better able to endure or flout.

Mediated by Canada's deeply colonial and racist character, which informs the middle class's national

parochialism, these class dynamics are driving the resurgent far right's fight today against lockdowns and vaccine mandates.

A Canadian tradition of violence

We've seen these dynamics in Canada before. The Canadian political landscape of the 1930s was [littered with fascist organizations](#), from Ontario's Swastika Clubs to the Canadian Union of Fascists, Canadian Nationalist Party, and Ku Klux Klan. The large and influential Orange Order also occasionally engaged in violence in support of its militant Protestant and pro-British Empire politics. One of the largest concentrations of fascists in North America was in Québec, with a violent, uniformed base centred on the petty bourgeoisie and students from the Université de Montréal. In a pattern that is repeated with every far-right resurgence in Canada, fascist organizations in the 1930s counted military personnel among their members; Major Joseph Maurice Scott, who taught physical training at Royal Military College, led the drilling of the paramilitary wing of Arcand's organization.

The fraternal relations that today's Conservative Party has struck up with the far right, witnessed during the United We Roll convoy in 2019 and again during the "Freedom Convoy" protests, are also not exceptional in the history of mainstream conservative parties in Canada (to say nothing of then-Prime Minister Mackenzie King's adulation of Hitler after meeting him in 1937). In the 1930s, Québec fascists received money from the federal Conservatives to actively build electoral support for the latter in the province; fascist leader and self-described "Canadian Führer" Adrien Arcand even met with pre-war Prime Minister R.B. Bennett to discuss strategy, while one of Bennett's cabinet ministers was a supporter of Arcand. Throughout its existence over the twentieth century, the Social Credit Party, which governed Alberta for three decades, would count fascists among its members. Some of them would ascend the party's hierarchy in Ontario in the 1970s.

As the long post-war boom descended into the economic crisis of the '70s, the far right around the world gathered momentum, including in Canada, once again drawing its leadership and core constituency from the middle class. In Toronto, a stridently anti-communist campus organization called the Edmund Burke Society formed in the mid-1960s. A few years later, some of its members, having radicalized further to the right, would form the fascist Western Guard. A number of other openly racist and violent organizations, including the KKK, also grew in Canada in the late 1970s and early '80s. Then as now, the far right used campaigns ostensibly in defence of free speech as an organizing tool.

The early 1990s saw the deepest recession Canada had experienced since the Great Depression, while immigration policy reforms from the previous two decades led to the growth of communities of colour in urban centres. This was the context in which the skinhead movement grew across the country and the neo-Nazi Heritage Front successfully recruited in high schools in the Greater Toronto Area and on university campuses across Ontario. Heritage Front leaders were well-connected with fascists abroad, particularly in the US. Their strategy included entry into Canada's newly established Reform Party, whose first leader, Preston Manning, is the son of a former leader of the Social Credit Party in Alberta. In its earliest iteration, the Reform Party was openly xenophobic, anti-Indigenous, and homophobic; it deployed a coded if barely concealed racism. The Heritage Front provided security for a number of the Reform Party's riding association meetings in Toronto, and for a 1991 rally led by Manning in Mississauga, with an estimated 6000 people in attendance. In 1993, the military was rocked by the Somalia Affair, in which white supremacist soldiers on a "peacekeeping" mission [assaulted, tortured, and murdered Somali men](#). A subsequent investigation found the military to be [full of white supremacists and neo-Nazis](#).

A new cover of an old, bad song

The latest far-right resurgence started early in the pandemic, with anti-mask and anti-lockdown demos across Canada. By the summer of 2021, with vaccine mandates coming into effect, these protests were clearly growing – and becoming angrier. Rallies drew thousands of people in a number of cities; in some instances, health-care workers were physically threatened. During the federal election campaign period, far-right protesters were consistently able to mobilize protests at Trudeau’s rallies, in some cases disrupting them. Notoriously, one protester, then [a riding association president of the People’s Party of Canada](#), pelted Trudeau with gravel. The far right’s momentum was expressed in the federal election results: the People’s Party, whose members are very active in the movements demanding an end to pandemic restrictions, grew its share of the popular vote to 5 percent, up from 1.6 percent in 2019.

The far right includes more than just the enraged middle class, of course. No doubt there are working-class people drawn to the anti-vaccine mandate movement. But most workers in Canada are vaccinated, and many [work refusals](#) and other labour actions related to COVID have sought stronger, not weakened, health and safety measures. The [labour movement has condemned](#) the “Freedom Convoy.” And most participants in that movement are in fact not truck drivers. Truckers in Ontario’s Peel Region, many of whom labour in what is essentially an employer-employee relation even if they are not legally classified as workers under Ontario labour law, [opposed the convoy](#). A significantly racialized workforce, they have been victims of wage theft and other systematic violations of their labour rights. The blockade of the Ambassador Bridge border crossing between Canada and the US in Windsor, Ontario, undertaken in solidarity with the convoy action in Ottawa, did not centrally involve truckers; it was truckers who were blockaded, prevented from crossing the border and doing their job. The working class is not the main driver of the far right’s resurgence in general or of the anti-vaccine and anti-mandate movement in particular.

Large capital may not support, and may even violate, public health protocols. But it does not normally do so for the same reasons as, or in coordination with, the far right. Notably, major industry organizations like the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters’ Association, Global Automakers of Canada, and Food, Health & Consumer Products of Canada were quick to publicly oppose the border blockades. (A number of small business associations came out against the blockades as well, indicating that the politics of the convoy movement are not shared across the entire middle class.) While large capital does not blink at mobilizing whatever tools it has at its disposal – including fascist forces – to violently neutralize existential threats to its power, it has other means to advance its interests in more typical circumstances. Generally speaking, large capital is tied to the Liberal and Conservative Parties and has greater access to the halls of formal political power than its smaller counterparts. It can also threaten or conduct a capital strike (that is, divestment) to bring recalcitrant governments and workers into line.

Some of the most outspoken critics of “lockdowns” and vaccine mandates have been petty-bourgeois capitalists such as restaurant owners, gym operators, and farmers who systematically violated the health and safety of their migrant workers. During the pandemic’s second wave, the most notable ([and Nazi-supported](#)) attempt to build a campaign against business restrictions in the Toronto area was led by the owner of [the restaurant Adamson BBQ](#); during the third wave, it was [a gym operator](#). We can detect here an echo, tragic or farcical, of classical fascism’s constituency, witnessed in Germany and Italy early in the 20th century: small business owners, rural landowners, managers, professionals, and military and ex-military members. (As Marx [once wrote](#): “The situation of the petty bourgeois predisposes him towards both socialism and capitalism, i.e. he is dazzled by the expansion of the power of the bourgeoisie on the one side, yet he shares in the suffering of the people on the other. He is bourgeois and people simultaneously.”) Given its lesser social weight and more limited access to the upper reaches of the state, there is greater pressure on the petty bourgeoisie than on the large bourgeoisie to actively mobilize as a protest movement in times of

growing crisis, and to try to draw behind it working-class support.

In Ontario and Alberta, enraged petty bourgeois engaged in a physical blockade to disrupt supply chains precisely because they have such little control over them. The class character of the far right's resurgence is also illustrated by the movement's links to the People's Party. Supporters of the People's Party are among the most strident opponents of "lockdowns" and vaccine mandates, and are [the strongest backers of the convoy protests by party affiliation](#). While the People's Party counts workers among its supporters (as all political parties do), [nearly a fifth](#) of its supporters are people who work "on [their] own business" – a higher proportion than in any other party in Canada, even though the People's Party has fewer supporters who earn more than \$100,000 per year than any other party save the NDP. Several small businesses could be found listed as donors on the convoy's GoFundMe page before it was shut down, alongside dozens of individual donations ranging from \$5000 to \$30,000. It is unlikely that working-class supporters are contributing donations of that size. Some of the largest donors to the convoy's GiveSendGo page, set up after access to GoFundMe was cut, are once again small businesses, including farms and a gun range.

Encompassing conspiracists, libertarians, and fascists, the new far-right movement can seem incoherent beyond the petty-bourgeois class rage it gives voice to. But its fluidity, common to nascent far-right movements, belies the consistent ideological substance that unites and animates it. Re-emerging after four decades of neoliberalism, a period defined by cuts to a welfare state that had once encouraged a sense of collective social responsibility (even if insufficiently and distortedly so), today's far right expresses a radical fidelity to market relations as the way to organize our lives, modified only by an emphasis on the importance of the heterosexual nuclear family. It is marked by a militant indifference to the well-being of others, particularly the most vulnerable. The rights it asserts can be boiled down to the right to engage in market exchange without annoying restrictions that could save lives. The freedom that the farmers at the convoy protests are defending is the freedom to let their migrant workers get sick and die. For some of its adherents, this politics takes on a violent and authoritarian complexion, a spirit of revenge against those movements and communities that they see as a threat to their fragile privileges, and to the "traditional" values and the sense of nation that offer them consolation in the face of social, political, and economic change they can do nothing to stop. This tendency is strongest in the far right's fascist current, whose members can be found among the convoy movement's key organizers and in the People's Party.

The far right's fetish for markets, indifference to the suffering of others, and authoritarian fantasies have an obvious racial character. We know which workers and communities have been most vulnerable to deadly COVID-19 outbreaks; we know whose murder is memorialized and foretold by swastikas, and by Confederate and Red Ensign flags. Against the well-being of those communities, and even against their existence, the far-right movement counterposes the well-being of the Canadian nation: the Canadian flag, too, is ubiquitous at the very white convoy rallies. By "People," the People's Party means the Canadian Volk.

¡No pasaran!

The gravitational pull of the far right will be especially strong if Canadian capitalism lurches into a period of deeper crisis. This is a real possibility. Canada has so far evaded such a crisis, thanks to policies of low interest rates, and to escalating debt levels that have sustained corporations and households in the face of low growth and profitability. Even in the absence of imminent economic catastrophe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) forecasts that Canada will have the worst-performing economy in the so-called advanced capitalist world between 2020-2030. The climate crisis will also drive the far right's growth: efforts to reduce carbon emissions have provoked mobilizations by the far right around the world, including 2019's United We Roll convoy.

As the far right develops further, its street-based politics will become even more important to it, as will violence as an ideological and tactical disposition. This disposition is what separates fascists from the right more generally: not their racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, nationalism, lust for empire, and antipathy to workers and the oppressed; not even a desire for authoritarian state power, which they share with the liberal tradition; but a militant commitment to building a mass street-based movement that operates through violence. Fascists may participate in elections, but never as an end in itself; for them, power is ultimately decided by force in the streets. And the last few weeks are a reminder that the police cannot – and should not – be relied on to defend us from those dangers. Neither will the milquetoast, electoralist, uninspiring politics of centrism and social democracy provide an adequate bulwark against a rising far-right tide.

The task of developing an effective left response is urgent. An emboldened far right whose power is based increasingly in the streets will need to be challenged there. This raises the unavoidable question of how to rebuild our capacities, since we are not entering this new, dangerous conjuncture from a place of strength, as the left did in previous periods when the far right stepped onto the political stage with revived power. Our organizational infrastructures, and our confidence to counterpose a radical, hopeful alternative vision to the present state of catastrophe, have atrophied in the face of the neoliberal barrage of the last four decades. There can be no substitute for the rebuilding of mass movements rooted in the self-activity of workers and the oppressed, and based in workplaces and communities. The far right is now simply too big to be fought by fiercely committed but small bands of antifascists; it will not be stopped without great numbers on our side, and the fascist current within it will definitely grow in the new period of struggle that the convoy movement has inaugurated.

Deplatforming by physically confronting the far right and fascists is an important tactic. But it is not, in and of itself, a strategy for defeating them. Nor should that tactic be abstracted from the need to rebuild our forces. We must be clear that the far right cannot be defeated by parliamentary denunciations or placated with state concessions, but also that the most effective way to free public space of its odious presence is to build a broad movement able to retake the streets. [The Battle of Billings Bridge](#) in Ottawa, in which more than a thousand counterprotesters shut down a section of the convoy and sent it home without its flags and jerry cans, offers an inspiring model of the kinds of actions we need. But to sustain such energy in the long run, as the far right and fascists grow in power, necessarily means continuing to draw in wider layers of people than are currently involved in the movement left, including those who may not yet be convinced of the need for direct confrontation. It requires that we do effective outreach to unions, community organizations, places of worship, and student groups – building relations of trust and solidarity, and connecting the threads of capitalist crisis, far-right reaction, and working-class liberation struggles. It demands, further, that we develop a politics that not only asserts what we oppose, but also offers a transformative vision of the world we fight for. Only by nurturing such a vision will we survive the dialectical storm of advance and retreat, hope and despair, that any left movement endures.

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