

# Ottawa responds to Trump's threats by affirming fealty to Canada-US war alliance, preparing retaliatory tariffs

Keith Jones  
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Canada's political leaders have responded to US President-elect Donald Trump's threats to impose punishing across-the-board tariffs and use "economic force" to transform Canada into the US's 51st state with doubled-down pledges of fealty to the Canada-US military-strategic partnership, trade war threats of their own, and bellicose nationalism.

Workers must be warned: the nationalist flag-waving is to serve as the political-ideological spearhead of a dramatically intensified assault on the working class.

This has been spelled out most clearly by Pierre Poilievre, the far-right leader of the official opposition Conservatives, who are poised to come to power in a federal election almost certain to be held this spring. Poilievre is casting himself in Trump-like terms as the foremost proponent of "Canada First." Speaking at a press conference last Thursday, he promised a Poilievre Conservative government would implement "massive" tax cuts for big business and the rich, pour huge sums into rebuilding Canada's "weakened" military, and slash all regulatory restraints on capital to boost profits, and carbon-gas producing energy and mineral production.

Declared Poilievre, "The message that I have for the Americans, by the way, [is] the days of us just handing over our businesses and our jobs because of our economic vandalism by this big, fat, money-hungry government in Ottawa, are over. We're going to have a fierce free-market economy that competes with every country on earth."

The prospect of Poilievre as prime minister is viewed favourably not just by Canadian big business, but also by much of the American ruling class. Even as Elon Musk, the world's richest man and Trump confidant, was endorsing Poilievre last week, the *New York Times* published a glowing portrait of the man who emerged as Conservative leader following his forthright advocacy of the fascist-led "Freedom" Convoy. In early 2022, the Convoy menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa with the backing of Trump and much of the Canadian political and corporate establishment, as well as sections of the national-security apparatus. The *Times*' profile said virtually nothing about this extra-parliamentary mobilization of far-right forces, merely referring to it as a protest by "truckers." Poilievre, according to the *Times*, displayed then as he does now an "instinctive sense" of what ordinary people want.

The governing Liberals, meanwhile, are rushing to replace Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with an even more right-wing representative of Canada's corporate elite. In the face of a Liberal parliamentary caucus revolt, Trudeau was forced to announce last week that he would step down as the head of government in March, once the Liberals have chosen a new leader. The frontrunners to replace him are Chrystia Freeland and Mark Carney. Freeland was the government's foremost anti-Russia war hawk till she precipitated the Liberal caucus revolt, by resigning as Finance Minister and accusing Trudeau of engaging in "political gimmicks" rather

than slashing spending so as to brace Canadian capitalism for trade war. As head of the Bank of Canada and then the Bank of England, Carney presided over "easy money" and massive bailouts for the financial elite and austerity for working people.

Trump's threats—first of a 25% tariff on all Canadian and Mexican imports from "Day One" of his second presidency, and then to annex Canada and invade Greenland and the Panama Canal—have staggered the Canadian ruling class.

When Trudeau, in an act of cowardice and subservience, rushed to Trump's estate at Mar-a-Lago to plead with the incoming president to back off from his tariff threat, there was strong ruling class support. But the mood has shifted dramatically, after Trump made clear that he would not be placated by Ottawa's pledges to assist his anti-immigrant witch-hunt, repeatedly mocked Trudeau as a "governor," and then forthrightly declared his ambition to annex Canada.

In a comment published in the *Globe and Mail* Saturday, Jean Chrétien, Canada's Liberal Prime Minister from 1993 to 2003, urged all political leaders to "start showing" the "same spine and toughness" that Canada had purportedly exhibited in the two imperialist world wars of the last century, and to combine pledges to Washington that "we are their best friends" with a readiness to "play offense."

"We also want to protect the Arctic," wrote Chrétien, in a reference to Trump's complaints that Ottawa is not bearing enough of the burden in the North American imperialist powers' strategic conflict with Russia and China. "But the United States refuses to recognize the Northwest Passage, insisting that it is an international waterway, even though it flows through the Canadian Arctic as Canadian waters. We need the United States to recognize the Northwest Passage as being Canadian waters."

Chrétien's comment is part of an avalanche of commentary in the capitalist press that more must be done to assert Canadian "sovereignty," above all by surging resources to the border and massively increasing military spending. This includes the demand that Canada immediately increase annual defence expenditure to 2 percent of GDP, which would require an almost C\$20 billion spending hike, while moving quickly to eliminate the budget deficit—in other words, massive social spending cuts.

The opposition, such as it is, of the ruling class and all its political representatives—from Poilievre and his Conservatives to the social democrats of the NDP—to Trump is motivated solely by concerns for the profits, access to markets and resources, and global influence of Canadian capitalism.

For the past three-quarters of a century, the Canada-US military-strategic and economic partnership has been the cornerstone of Canadian imperialism's world position, the framework within which it has asserted and advanced its global predatory interests.

The Canadian ruling class is as anxious as are Trump, the Biden-Harris-

led Democratic Party, and Wall Street in shoring up US imperialism's collapsing global hegemony. Under both Conservative and NDP-backed Liberal governments, Canada has been integrated ever more fully into Washington's wars and regime-change operations. Today, Ottawa plays a significant role in all three major fronts in a developing US-instigated global war: against Russia in Eastern Europe, Iran and its allies in the Middle East, and China in the Indo-Pacific.

The main concern of the Canadian bourgeoisie is to negotiate the most advantageous position within a Trump-led Fortress North America. This is underscored by the ruling class enthusiasm for Poilievre, who is vowing to carry out a Trump-style social counterrevolution at the expense of working people's social and democratic rights. It is also demonstrated by the unanimous support within the ruling class for the Canada-US military-strategic alliance and its multiple facets, from NATO, NORAD, and the Five Eyes to USMEC (the United States-Mexico-Canada trade agreement that superseded NAFTA.)

Thus, as he dismissed Trump's annexationist aims, Trudeau declared the Canada-US partnership "unique." "Both our countries benefit from being each other's biggest trading and security partners," he affirmed. Ontario Premier Doug Ford, for his part, proclaims the need for a Fortress North America or "Fortress Am-Can" virtually whenever he comments on Canada-US relations and the looming trade war.

Trudeau is to preside Wednesday over a meeting of provincial premiers and territorial leaders in Ottawa convened to discuss how to respond to Trump's 25 percent tariff threat.

Trump has claimed the tariffs are necessary to compel Canada and Mexico to prevent "illegal migrants" and fentanyl from flooding into the US. These "national security" concerns are a pretext to justify Trump violating the provisions of USMEC, with the aim of extorting concessions on trade, investment, foreign and energy policy. In Canada's case, he also intends to compel Ottawa to at least surpass NATO's 2 percent of GDP military-spending "floor." His economic bullying is also a means for Trump to advance his objective of militarizing North America's external and internal borders in preparation for world war and mass social unrest.

Deeming the federal government's commitment of more than \$1 billion in additional border spending and a surge of security personnel, drones and helicopters to the border inadequate, various provincial governments, including Quebec, Ontario and Alberta, have deployed their own forces to help police the border and thereby placate Trump.

However, the fascist president, sensing the vulnerability of US imperialism's Canadian partners and rivals, has upped his demand.

The federal and provincial governments and Canadian big business are increasingly resigned to the inevitability of an economically damaging and politically destabilizing tariff war. On Sunday, both Trudeau and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly reiterated Ottawa's intention to retaliate for any new US tariffs. Based on orchestrated government leaks, the media reported last week that American steel products, orange juice, ceramics including toilets and sinks, glassware, and different types of plastics are among hundreds of items listed as possible targets for retaliatory tariffs.

However, there are growing cleavages within the Canadian ruling class, rooted in longstanding sectional divisions and the varied role different regions play in the integrated continental economy, over what retaliatory measures should be taken. Joly's claim in her Sunday interview with the CTV that "nothing is off the table" in respect to Canadian retaliation and that the government is considering curtailing or even banning Canadian exports to the US of energy—oil, uranium, natural gas and hydro-electricity—immediately provoked a visceral reaction.

Danielle Smith, the far-right premier of oil-rich Alberta, warned, as she had when Ottawa had previously raised the possibility of an energy export tax, that any federal government attempt to curtail Alberta's oil exports would provoke a "national unity crisis." Raising the veiled threat of Alberta separatism, she denounced "Eastern politicians," and cautioned

Ottawa that it should not threaten Trump with something it couldn't do.

The previous day Smith travelled to Mar-a-Lago, along with far-right provocateur Jordan Petersen and the Trump wannabe Canadian businessman and TV personality Kevin O'Leary. She was granted a brief audience with the incoming president, during which she tried to convince him to exempt Canadian energy exports, if he persisted with imposing tariffs on Canadian products. As part of what Smith called a "friendly and constructive conversation" with Trump, she also pitched her plan to double Alberta oil production so the US can export more oil to the rest of the world.

Workers in the US, Canada and Mexico have no interest in being dragged into a trade war whose principal victims will be working people, through layoffs, plant closures and price increases.

All the more so, in that this trade war arises from the frenzied drive of the major capitalist powers, Canada included, to secure markets, resources and investment in a global inter-capitalist struggle to gain dominance in AI, robotics and other emerging technologies and prepare for all-out global war.

In so far as the crisis is roiling the Canadian bourgeoisie, workers across Canada—French and English-speaking and immigrant—should seek to exploit it, by intensifying the class struggle and forging unity with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and beyond in defence of all jobs, public services and workers' rights and opposition to imperialist war.

This is the exact opposite of the course being pursued by the social-democratic NDP and the trade unions. They are to be found in the front lines of those agitating for retaliatory measures and increased military spending, while appealing to Trump to remove his tariff threat in recognition of the pivotal role Canadian natural resources and manufactures plays in feeding American imperialism's war machine.

A similar role is being played by Québec Solidaire, the pro-independence pseudo-left party that is the second opposition party in the Québec National Assembly. It has joined the Parti Québécois, which has been in the forefront of chauvinist anti-immigrant agitation, in urging a "Quebec First strategy," including separate negotiations between Québec City and Washington, on the grounds Ottawa will give preference to defending Ontario's auto industry and Alberta's energy over protecting "Quebec interests."

If these elements are allowed to get their way, the working class will be politically bound hand and foot to the Canadian ruling class as it seeks to strike a bargain with Trump and wages class war, or to whichever of its rival factions they are most closely associated with. Even before Trump's tariff war threat, the Alberta NDP was moving to sever its ties with the national party, so it could tailor its program more to the needs of the province's oil barons.

While railing against China, Russia and Iran, during last fall's election campaign, Trump repeatedly proclaimed that the greatest threat to the US oligarchs for whom he speaks was the "enemy within"—that is the American working class.

The only viable strategy for workers in Canada to assert their class interests in opposition to Trudeau, Poilievre, Doug Ford, Alberta's Smith, the rival federalist and separatist wings of the Québec political elite, and, last but not least, Trump is by joining forces with that "enemy within" in the fight for workers' political power in North America and around the world.



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