

Why is Canada's ruling elite deploying the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

By Roger Jordan
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The deployment of up to 1,600 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel, including 150 trained medics, to care homes in Quebec and Ontario has laid bare the catastrophic state of social services in Canada after decades of austerity. Over 80 percent of the more than 4,275 officially recorded novel coronavirus fatalities have occurred in long-term care and seniors facilities, where underpaid and poorly equipped staff have struggled to prevent the spread of the virus.

Whatever assistance the soldiers may provide, the deployments requested by the right-wing governments of François Legault and Doug Ford are not motivated by the desire to save human lives. Rather, the ruling elite, in pursuit of its predatory class interests, has a two-fold aim: to create the impression it has everything “under control” so it can implement its plans to rapidly force workers back to work amid a raging pandemic; and to boost popular support for the military, and thereby legitimize its plans for rearmament and war.

From the standpoint of the back-to-work campaign, it was necessary for the ruling elite to change the subject from the horrific reports of mass deaths coming out of long-term care homes. At the Residence Herron in Montreal, 31 COVID-19 deaths were recorded in a matter of weeks, with one official who entered the home likening it to a “concentration camp.” In Pickering, Ontario, at the Orchard Villa care and retirement home, 49 residents have died and over 200 are infected, prompting relatives to demand a government investigation.

These horrific reports hardly provided auspicious conditions for Canada's pro-corporate governments to force hundreds of thousands of people back to work. But with the announced deployments, the narrative changed. “Our women and men in uniform will step up with the valour and courage they have always shown,” declared Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Legault, who requested 1,000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel to deploy across the province's long-term care homes April 22, quickly positioned himself at the head of the ruling elite's back-to-work drive. In a phased plan to lift restrictions that began on Monday, shops have been opened outside the Montreal region, and schools, day care facilities, manufacturing, construction and other non-essential businesses are to reopen across Quebec by May 25 at the latest.

In neighbouring Ontario, where well over 130 outbreaks at long-term care facilities have been reported, Ford asked for 200 military personnel to relieve the situation at five hard-hit homes. After claiming that he would wait for 14 consecutive days of declining infection rates before beginning to ease Ontario's lockdown measures, Ford promptly abandoned this pledge and announced last Friday that wide swathes of the economy would reopen this week. This includes the recommencement of virtually all construction activity, and the opening of garden centres, auto dealerships and landscaping services.

The dispatch of soldiers to care homes in Ontario and Quebec is merely one element in a broader military deployment being carried out in the name of fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance announced in March that up to 24,000 soldiers, approximately one quarter of all regular CAF and reserve troops, have been assigned to a special anti-COVID-19 force for the duration of the pandemic. Lt-Gen. Alain Parent, who retired in 2018 after serving as Vance's deputy, made clear that the military will not simply focus on providing medical assistance and help with distributing supplies, but also stands ready to conduct “surveillance, security, augmenting law enforcement, [and] augmenting first responders.”

Vance underlined this point, putting the troops on a “war footing” in a five-page letter published on the CAF's website. Stressing the importance of soldiers staying healthy, Vance added that the military had to remain “fit to fight.”

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the enemies the military will need to “fight” are at home as well as abroad. Leading bourgeois publications, including Britain's *Financial Times*, have raised the spectre of the pandemic producing social unrest on a vast scale, driven not least by the huge bailouts already given to big business and the devastating economic downturn that is accelerating internationally. Jen Gerson, writing in Canada's *Maclean's Magazine*, expressed those fears when she warned, “We've had a good, long, 70-year run in the West, but this is the end of that golden age.”

Earlier the head of Canada's armed forces said that the military is actively planning for the “worst-case scenario,” although Vance avoided spelling out what that means either in

terms of COVID-19 fatalities or the eruption of mass opposition to state authorities.

Vance has warned military commanders that the pandemic could persist through a series of waves for over a year, and that requests for military assistance could come from “all echelons of government” and the private sector. According to a CBC report, the military’s worst-case scenario includes “public disturbances.”

Beyond its national borders, Canadian imperialism is equally determined to keep up the pressure on its foreign enemies. Since the outset of the pandemic, Trudeau’s Liberal government has sought to closely coordinate its policies with the Trump administration, including on restricting cross-border movements and deporting refugees.

Although Trudeau has not joined Trump in openly accusing Chinese authorities of manufacturing or deliberately spreading the virus, Canadian government officials have endorsed politically-motivated calls for an investigation into China’s role in the emergence of the virus. Leading opposition politicians, including Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer and leadership candidates Peter MacKay and Erin O’Toole, signed an open letter produced by the well-connected MacDonald Laurier Institute that held China responsible for the pandemic.

The Trudeau government has repeatedly lined Canada up four-square behind Washington’s provocations against Beijing, including by significantly expanding Canada’s military operations in the Asia-Pacific. At Washington’s behest, Canadian authorities arrested and are in the process of extraditing Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Chinese tech giant Huawei, on trumped-up US government charges that she evaded its illegal sanctions on Iran.

The Liberal government has also deepened Canada’s participation in other US military-strategic offensives. It has deployed CAF personnel to Ukraine and to the Baltic republics to menace Russia and to the oil-rich Middle East, and it has aided and abetted Washington’s regime-change drive in Venezuela and the recent made-in-USA coup in Bolivia. To ensure sufficient resources to pursue Canada’s predatory imperialist interests around the globe, the Trudeau government is also hiking military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026, and buying new fleets of warships and fighter jets.

The coronavirus pandemic is acting as an accelerant to what Pentagon war-planners have dubbed a new era of great-power “strategic conflict,” with the US, Canada and the European imperialist powers voicing fears that China could emerge economically and geopolitically strengthened from the pandemic. Trump’s incendiary and contrived allegations against Beijing, accusing it of causing mass death in the US, are aimed both at deflecting responsibility from the manifest failure of his own administration and US capitalism to protect the American people from the pandemic, and at legitimizing further US aggression, including military action, against China.

Canada’s ruling elite, which has enjoyed an intimate military-strategic partnership with Washington for over three-quarters of a century, endorses this reckless agenda of seizing on the pandemic to intensify pressure on its rivals. In March, Vance warned a defence conference that Canada and its allies are engaged in a “global fight over values” that could result in the upending of the post-World War II order. In a keynote address to a Conference of Defence Associations event, he called for upgrading the North American Aerospace Defence command (NORAD), which would involve tens of billions in additional military spending on top of the increases already announced by Trudeau. This upgrade would inevitably be used to press for Canada’s participation in Washington’s ballistic missile defence shield, whose purpose is to create conditions for the waging of a “winnable” nuclear war.

One week later, in an interview with the Canadian Press, Vance warned that adversaries like Russia or China could take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their military position in the Arctic and other regions. “We continue to do our job, part of which is to deter and, if necessary, defeat attacks on Canada,” he added.

The ruling elite hopes that the military’s prominent role in the official Canadian response to the COVID-19 pandemic will help shift the public’s perception of the armed forces, creating a certain degree of acceptance of and even support for bigger Defence budgets and aggressive military operations around the world, including against nuclear-armed Russia and China. As Matt Gurney observed in the right-wing *National Post*, “When the pandemic is finally behind us and we have a chance to take stock of all the ways we should have been better prepared, military preparedness should be near the top of the list. And maybe this time, for a change, the public will be ready to listen, and pay up.”

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