

Across Canada tens of thousands join protests against police violence

By Roger Jordan
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Tens of thousands of workers and young people joined protests across Canada over the weekend to oppose police violence and racism. The trigger for the demonstrations was the brutal police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. But protesters in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and other cities emphasized that conditions in Canada are all too similar, with police wantonly killing and assaulting workers and youth, and harassing blacks, indigenous people and other visible minorities.

The large turnout in at least 25 cities across the country also gave expression to the deepening social crisis produced by decades of capitalist austerity and intensified by the ruling class' criminally negligent response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tens of thousands marched in Montreal Sunday. In addition to commemorating the memory of Floyd and voicing support for the mass protests sweeping the US, protesters strongly denounced Quebec Premier Francois Legault, a right-wing Quebec nationalist who has built his political career on whipping up anti-immigrant xenophobia and Islamophobia. Last week, Legault rejected the suggestion that racism is a major problem in Quebec. "I'm so mad," Amina Diallo, a protester, told CBC. "He talks like he knows it all, like he is one of us. He has no idea about our life experiences."

Reflecting the reactionary political outlook of the organizers, the New Generation Black League, right-wing political figures were invited to address the Montreal demonstration. These included Quebec Liberal Party leader Dominique Anglade. The Liberals, who held office for all but 18 months between April 2003 and October 2018, imposed round after round of austerity, and in 2012 presided over months of violent police repression of a province-wide student strike.

Montreal police confronted a small group of protesters and attacked them with pepper spray and tear gas after they refused to disperse at the end of the demonstration.

Sizable protests also occurred outside the provincial legislature in Quebec City, in Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivières, Rimouski, and the small north shore industrial city of Sept-Isles.

Thousands of protesters joined two separate demonstrations in Toronto on Saturday, including one that started at Nathan

Phillips Square before making its way to the American consulate. The other demonstration marched from Trinity Bell Park to Queens Park, the seat of the provincial legislature.

One of those participating in the protest outside the US consulate was Sahar Bahadi, the mother of Sammy Yatim, who was shot to death by a Toronto police officer in an empty streetcar in 2013. "I feel sorry for the people who lost their children, a member of their family without any reason by the police. Police should be protecting us, not killing us. My heart is with everybody here," she said (see: "Toronto cop found guilty on lesser charge in killing of Sammy Yatim").

Ten thousand people also marched in London, Ontario, while protests in Kingston and Guelph, among other cities, drew thousands more.

In Calgary, Alberta at least 4,000 protesters gathered downtown Saturday. At Olympic Plaza, a candlelit vigil was attended by thousands of people, who chanted the names of those killed by the police in the United States and Canada. A protest was also held in Fort McMurray, the centre of northern Alberta's tar sands oil industry. Last week, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations Chief Allan Adam revealed that he and his wife were assaulted by police in a Fort McMurray parking lot earlier this year.

Thousands also participated in demonstrations Saturday in St John's, Newfoundland; Victoria British Columbia; and Whitehorse in the far north. On Friday, thousands more had gathered outside the Manitoba legislature in Winnipeg and at Jack Poole Plaza in Vancouver. As many as ten thousand joined the latter protest.

The scale of the protests and the fact they encompassed dozens of cities and in all parts of the country speak to the deep-seated popular outrage over police violence. They also underscore that Floyd's brutal murder was a trigger event, unleashing pent-up anger over decades of austerity and unprecedented levels of social inequality (see: "Mass protests erupt across Canada against police brutality and Trump").

The brutal reality of Canadian capitalism has been further exposed during the coronavirus pandemic. The ruling elite rewarded itself with hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts funds to indemnify itself against any losses, while placing the millions of workers and youth who have lost their jobs on

ration-type relief benefits. Now it is mounting a back-to-work campaign, forcing workers to return to their jobs under unsafe conditions.

The outrage expressed towards Legault at Sunday's Montreal demonstration was significant in this regard. The hard-right former Air Transat CEO has been touted in the bourgeois media as a popular figure who has guided his province through the pandemic and is now successfully reopening the economy. In reality, Quebec has suffered the highest number of infections of any province in Canada, and its deaths per head of population are among the highest in the world.

The economic and social crisis and the American ruling class' looting of the Treasury and readiness to sacrifice workers' lives in the pursuit of profit have also been the driving force behind the unprecedented wave of multi-racial, multi-ethnic protests that have engulfed all parts of the United States, including the Deep South, since Floyd's brutal murder on May 25.

The Trump administration, with the complicity of the Democrats, has responded by inciting military-police violence that has left a dozen protesters dead, wounded many more, and led to thousands of arrests. On June 1, Trump sought to deploy the US military across the country to suppress the protests in violation of the Constitution and initiated a White House-led coup aimed at establishing a presidential dictatorship.

The mass protests have terrified Canada's ruling elite no less than its American counterpart. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has refused to condemn Trump's authoritarian power grab for fear that such criticism could damage Canadian imperialism's military-strategic partnership with Washington. Trudeau's 21-second pause after he was asked to comment on Trump's inciting of police violence last week and the praise he has since received from the corporate media for putting Canada's "national interest" first exemplify the absence of any constituency for democratic rights within ruling circles (see: Canadian establishment shrugs off Trump's authoritarian power grab, voices "horror" over mass protests).

Seeking to repair the political damage done by his refusal to criticize Trump, Trudeau appeared with great public fanfare at a protest against police violence and racism on Parliament Hill in Ottawa last Friday. As the protesters remained silent for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the length of time Floyd was choked to death by police officer Derek Chauvin, Trudeau took a knee. Trudeau was conspicuously absent, however, when the protest reached the US embassy.

Trudeau's public appearance was also aimed at bolstering his tattered "progressive" credentials. Since coming to power in 2015, Trudeau's trade union-backed Liberal government has deployed racial and gender identity politics to conceal its pro-war, pro-austerity agenda. Trudeau and his supporters have touted his appointment of the first Sikh Defence Minister and the first indigenous Justice Minister, as well as the Liberals' claim to be pursuing a "feminist foreign policy."

But even some bourgeois political representatives recognize that Trudeau's posturing is wearing thin, and fear that the growing protests will come into direct conflict with the entire political establishment. This was the significance of comments made by New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh in an interview with CTV News on Sunday. Trying to cast himself as an ally of the protesters, Singh denounced Trudeau for his silence when asked to condemn Trump, which he said showed "cowardice." In his remarks, Singh, like the NDP's US Democratic Party allies, avoided any reference to Trump's attempted coup d'état. Instead, he merely accused the President of enflaming an already tense situation and encouraging racism. Singh concluded by saying that risking economic retaliation from the White House for criticizing Trump would be a price worth paying, for "speak(ing) up when something is so wrong."

This posturing is thoroughly cynical. For one thing, Singh avoided reference to Ottawa's intimate military-strategic cooperation with Washington, which has seen Canada participate in virtually every US-led war during the past quarter-century. This omission is not hard to explain since Canadian imperialism's involvement in US wars of aggression has invariably been endorsed by the NDP. In last year's federal election, Singh's party fought on a program that called for tens of billions of dollars in additional military spending to enable the armed forces to meet growing "strategic challenges" around the world, above all from Russia and China.

Secondly, the NDP and trade unions have responded to the greatest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s by cementing their long-standing close ties to the big business Liberals. Singh's criticism of Trudeau came little more than a week after he concluded a parliamentary deal with the Prime Minister to shut down the House of Commons for four months. The agreement strengthens the hand of the Liberal minority government at a time when major companies are imposing tens of thousands of layoffs and other attacks on the working class, and when the makeshift financial aid programs put in place during the coronavirus pandemic are being cut back. Singh's deal with the big business Liberals to suspend parliament, based on a worthless commitment to provide 10 days of annual sick leave for workers—a pledge that the provincial governments have already rejected out of hand—is enabling Andrew Scheer's hard-right Conservatives to cynically posture as defenders of "democracy."

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