

Canadian government threatens fines and jail time to force workers back to work

By Roger Jordan
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Justin Trudeau's Liberal government plans to make legislative changes to its Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in the coming days, so that it can use threats of onerous fines, criminal prosecution and jail time to force workers to return to work under unsafe conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposed changes underscore that the trade union- and New Democratic Party (NDP)-backed Liberal government is spearheading a homicidal back-to-work drive that prioritizes big business profit over workers' lives and threatens to dramatically increase the numbers of coronavirus infections and deaths.

Millions of workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work because of the pandemic are currently receiving the CERB, a makeshift program that has temporarily replaced the more restrictive Employment Insurance system. But with provincial governments across the country rushing for the past five weeks, with Trudeau's assent, to rescind all lockdown restrictions, there has been a mounting chorus of complaints from big business, the Conservative opposition, Quebec's CAQ government, and other right-wing forces that the "overly generous" CERB is a "disincentive" to work.

The proposed changes to the CERB, outlined in a draft bill circulated to the opposition parties last Saturday and leaked to the press Monday, are meant to threaten and bully workers into returning to work as soon as their employer and big business political hirelings in government pronounce it "safe."

Under Bill C-17, CERB recipients who "fail to return to work when it is reasonable to do so and the employer makes a request for their return," "fail to resume self-employment when it is reasonable to do so," or "decline a reasonable job offer when they are able to work" will be liable to punitive fines. These could be as much as three times any CERB amount they are deemed to have improperly claimed.

The proposed legislation also outlines a series of new CERB "fraud" offenses punishable by fines of up to \$5,000 and six-months in jail. These include "making false or

misleading statements, failing to fully disclose all relevant income or receiving an income support payment for which a person is not eligible."

The last of these is especially threatening, given that the bill stipulates that a worker who refuses to return to their job is ineligible for further CERB benefits. In effect, the government is seeking the legal power to imprison workers who attempt to use the CERB to prevent their employer from starving them back to work under unsafe conditions.

The Liberals' bill will also change eligibility criteria for the CERB. As of July 5, recipients will apply for the benefit every two weeks rather than every four weeks. According to news reports, this alteration is aimed at making the program more "flexible," including by helping employers take workers back on reduced hours. The government also wants to reduce the amount of money CERB recipients can earn before experiencing clawbacks to their benefits, from \$1000 to \$500 per month.

The draft bill underscores that the Trudeau Liberal government is intent on ratcheting up corporate Canada's reckless back-to-work drive, which is proceeding apace even as total coronavirus infections approach 100,000 and deaths surpass 8,000; and that it stands ready to use the full force of the capitalist state, including the courts and prisons, to suppress worker opposition.

From the outset, the Liberal government's overriding concern has been to protect the wealth and investments of the ruling elite. While over \$650 billion was funnelled into the coffers of the big banks and corporations with virtually no strings attached, the aid offered to the more than 7 million workers who lost their jobs and income has been meager and temporary.

The CERB pays recipients a mere \$2,000 per month, a sum that fails to even cover the rent of a modest apartment in Toronto or Vancouver, and for a maximum of 16 weeks. For millions of workers who lost their jobs in March, the end of their 16 weeks of eligibility is fast approaching, with many facing the prospect of having no job to return to when their CERB payments expire in July.

Once the bailout of the financial oligarchy was concluded, the Liberal government, trade unions, federal opposition parties, and provincial governments began working in tandem to remove lockdown measures and reopen the economy. Trudeau's Liberals, who never tire of touting their "progressive" credentials, have worked hand-in-glove with the hard-right premiers François Legault in Quebec and Doug Ford in Ontario to ease restrictions under conditions where virtually nothing has been done to strengthen Canada's woefully underfunded health care system. In flagrant violation of World Health Organization recommendations, the "reopening" of the economy has proceeded without the implementation of systematic mass testing, contact-tracing, and quarantining programs.

Now, in the same week that Ford announced Ontario's move to the next phase of reopening, the federal Liberals are establishing a punitive framework to bully workers back to their jobs under threat of destitution, bankruptcy and even imprisonment.

Needless to say, business has warmly applauded the brutal measures contained in the Liberals' draft bill. Dan Kelly of the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses demonstrated just how far removed the corporate elite is from the daily lives of working people, claiming, "While some workers are worried about returning to work for health-related reasons, many are happy to take the summer off if their income needs are taken care of through CERB."

The reality is that the measures contained in Bill C-17 were dictated by the major corporations and banks. In the days leading up to the publication of the legislation, Trudeau held one-on-one discussions with the chief executives of Canada's six major banks, as part of the government's consultations with big business on its "economic recovery" plan.

If the Liberals and corporate Canada can pursue their back-to-work agenda so ruthlessly, it is because they know they enjoy the support of the New Democrats and trade unions. The unions and NDP have responded to the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s by cementing their long-standing alliance with the Liberals, long the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government. This is the political expression of the union bureaucrats and social-democrats' intensified efforts to suppress the class struggle, amid mounting working class anger over the criminal indifference of the ruling elite towards their working conditions and lives.

In March, Canadian Labour Congress head Hassan Yussuff initiated what he called a "collaborative front" between the unions and Canada's employers' organizations. This, above all, consisted in maintaining radio silence on the vast sums of money forked over to the financial oligarchy,

while helping the Trudeau government design and promote its rations-style CERB. Now the unions are assisting the ruling class in its premature back-to-work drive.

As for the NDP, in late May it once again gave the minority Liberal government the votes it needed to proceed with its agenda. Touting a worthless commitment from Trudeau to ensure workers across Canada receive 10 days per year of paid sick leave—a proposal most provincial governments have already dismissed—Jagmeet Singh and his fellow social democrats voted for a Liberal motion to shut down regular sittings of parliament until September. As a result, the government will now be able to gut financial aid to workers with virtually no public or parliamentary debate.

Working people must oppose the Liberal government's efforts to bully them back to their jobs with threats of fines and imprisonment. To do so, they must establish rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, in every workplace. The tasks of these committees should be to uncompromisingly fight for the safety interests of the workers, and oppose the demands of corporate management and governments alike to subordinate all health considerations to capitalist profit.

The fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to workers' struggle against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a struggle against capitalism and for socialism, that is, for the restructuring of socioeconomic life under a workers' government so that meeting social needs, not swelling investor profit, is the animating principle.

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