



Montreal

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Covid-19: Ottawa declares emergency as truckers' protest continues

Owen Dyer

Canada's capital, Ottawa, has declared a state of emergency in response to a protest against pandemic health measures that has brought the city centre to a near standstill and shows no sign of ending after 12 days.

The protest has turned into a "siege of our downtown area," wrote the mayor, Jim Watson, in letters to the provincial premier, Doug Ford, and Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau. "Given the scope and scale of the armada of large trucks that are now occupying our downtown core, we are writing to you today to ask that you work to help the city secure 1800 officers to quell the insurrection that the Ottawa Police Service is not able to contain," he wrote.

The protesters' numbers are not large, at under 8000. But the presence of more than 500 heavy trucks and other vehicles has greatly increased their footprint and made them almost impossible to dislodge.

Locals have been harassed and threatened, and the trucks have sounded their air horns late into the night, triggering a class action lawsuit from residents who are unable to sleep. Ottawa police said that it was investigating over 70 criminal offences including 11 alleged hate crimes and a fire started in an apartment block where residents had complained about noise.

Many businesses and clinics remain shut, including the city's main shopping centre, which closed after being invaded by a crowd of protesters without masks. Hospitals have moved from eight hour to 12 hour shifts as staff struggle to get to work. Patients fearful of crossing the protest zone are cancelling appointments, and fewer are visiting emergency departments, Ottawa's hospitals said.

Health workers have felt especially targeted by the protesters' hostility and are being told not to travel in their work clothes. Two ambulances were attacked with stones, said Jocelyne Marciano, operations commander for the Ottawa Paramedic Service. A paramedic who got out to inspect the damage was greeted with racial epithets, she added.

The police response has been widely criticised for being overly timid. Fewer than 700 parking tickets have been issued, even though hundreds of vehicles have blocked major downtown arteries for 12 days.

Ottawa's police chief, Peter Sloly, said that the protesters "remain highly organised, well funded, and extremely committed to resisting efforts to end the demonstration safely," adding that some were believed to be armed.

Last weekend police moved to stop the demonstrators from resupplying their convoy with the fuel they need to remain outdoors in sub-zero temperatures. "Our officers were surrounded by over 100 demonstrators—a near riot broke out," said Sloly,

adding that his officers were "at great risk in every single encounter."

He added that the police had let the trucks in on the basis of an agreement that the protest would last three days. At that point, however, the organisers were already issuing press releases saying that they would not leave until all pandemic public health measures were revoked or the government resigned.

Foreign fundraising sustains protest

With an impressive vaccine uptake of 88% overall—and 90% among truckers—Canada seems an unlikely target for such an organised and militant anti-vaccine protest.

The "freedom convoy" was organised after the federal government imposed a rule requiring truckers entering from the United States to be vaccinated. Most pandemic measures such as lockdowns and mask mandates are controlled by provincial governments, and Trudeau lacks the authority to change them. Even if the Canadian trucker mandate were revoked, an identical rule would remain in place on the US side of the border.

Numerous polls have shown Canadians opposing the occupation by about two to one, and 87% of Ottawa's residents polled said that they wanted the protesters to leave. The blockade has also been condemned by the Ontario Trucking Association and the Canadian Trucking Alliance, which said that "a great number of these protestors have no connection to the trucking industry and have a separate agenda."

The protest's chief fundraiser is Tamara Lich, a leader in the "Wexit" movement that seeks to separate Canada's western prairie provinces. Police investigators say that much of the protesters' funding comes from far right activists south of the border.

The fundraising website GoFundMe raised nearly C\$10m (£5.8m; €6.9m; US\$7.9m) for the protests, but it announced that it would be returning most of this after police provided evidence that the "previously peaceful demonstration has become an occupation."

Protest supporters then turned to the Christian fundraising site GiveSendGo, raising nearly C\$5m in three days, as US Republican politicians vowed to investigate GoFundMe. Donald Trump was one of several to back the protesters, tweeting that they were "peacefully protesting the harsh policies of far left lunatic Justin Trudeau who has destroyed Canada with insane covid mandates."

Copcat protests

The US has seen three times as many covid deaths per capita as Canada. Trudeau and Ontario's conservative premier, Ford, have condemned the protests, both highlighting hate symbols brandished by some participants.

Trudeau said, “The people of Ottawa don’t deserve to be harassed in their own neighbourhoods, don’t deserve to be confronted with the inherent violence of a swastika flying on a street corner, or a Confederate flag, or insults and jeers just because they’re wearing a mask.”

Despite the small numbers of demonstrators their methods have drawn so much attention that cities around the world are bracing for potential copycat protests. A “convoy to Canberra” has now been camped outside Australia’s parliament for a week.

On 7 February a new vehicle blockade sprang up on Canada’s busiest border crossing, at Windsor, Ontario, and a vehicular protest against covid measures rolled into Wellington, New Zealand. The following day several arrests were made as Wellington protesters tried to breach the gates of parliament.

“Freedom convoys” to occupy Washington and Brussels are now being organised online.