



Canada truckers protest stirs debate

Cathy Young
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Usually placid Canada has been shaken by massive demonstrations against COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The protest, led by truckers, paralyzed traffic and disrupted neighborhoods in downtown Ottawa and blocked some vital commercial routes linking Canada and the United States. On Monday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took the drastic step of declaring a national public order emergency for the first time in half a century, allowing some civil liberties to be curbed to quell the protests.

The debate on these events has been fast and furious. Is Trudeau's response authoritarianism in the name of public health or justified action to stop lawlessness? Is there a double standard applied to anti-mandate protests and racial justice demonstrations? And is the truckers' movement a working-class uprising that the left should cheer, or a far-right assault on democracy?

The protest was triggered by a Canadian federal mandate, which went into effect Jan. 15, requiring all truckers who make a cross-border trip to the United States to show proof of COVID vaccination before reentry. A similar rule for all foreign truckers went into effect in the U.S. a week later. While government-mandated vaccination for adults in general raises troubling issues of personal autonomy, the border-crossing requirement seems a narrowly targeted and sensible measure, especially considering the far greater spread of COVID in the U.S. than in Canada. Yet many truckers argue that they have little on-the-job contact with others and pose a low risk.

The mandates are certainly a legitimate issue to protest — but hardly one that justifies drastically disrupting people's lives.

The truckers' supporters often claim the protests are not anti-vaccine, just anti-mandate. Yet even sympathetic accounts suggest that most of the protesters are unvaccinated for various bad reasons, from belief in medical quackery to mistrust of mainstream institutions. They have a right to those views. Current evidence suggests that vaccination moderately reduces the risk of transmission and drastically reduces the risk of severe illness and death, making the unvaccinated mainly a health danger to themselves (though the strain on hospitals remains a serious problem,

and the vaccines' protection against transmission may be greater for other variants of the virus). But to glorify the protesters as freedom fighters seems misguided.

The narrative of the working-class rebellion is also misguided. According to various sources, some 90% of Canadian truckers are vaccinated, so it's safe to say that the protesters don't represent the industry. Many are not truckers or even blue-collar workers. There have also been reports of former police officers and military service members helping coordinate the demonstrations. Many seem to have free-floating grievances about being unheard and disrespected rather than a clear agenda.

Close to two-thirds of Canada's population, various polls show, opposes the protests. Yet given their unpopularity, it is especially important to remember that the protesters have civil rights. They shouldn't be silenced — except when deliberately disturbing the peace with high-decibel noises.

The right to protest should not, regardless of the cause, include the right to blockade roads and cause chaos and mayhem — and shame on you if you excuse such behavior on "your" side while condemning it on the "other" side. But having obtained emergency powers, Trudeau should tread lightly. Only lawless behavior, not "deplorable" opinions, should be punished, and conversation on pandemic restrictions should be as open as possible.

Cathy Young is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. She writes on a wide variety of cultural and political issues, including gender issues (equal opportunity in the workplace, sexual harassment policy, sexual assault and domestic violence law, child custody, etc.), freedom of speech and intellectual tolerance, diversity, education, and perspectives on American history, as well as Russia and U.S.-Russian relations