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Trudeau's "blackface" photos: How to oppose Canada's Liberal government, and how not to

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau convened an emergency press conference on his Liberal election campaign plane Wednesday evening in response to *Time* magazine's publication of a photograph that shows him clothed in an Aladdin costume and with a make-up darkened face. The photograph, lifted from the yearbook of a private school where Trudeau once taught, dates from 2001.

A contrite Trudeau said that he wanted to apologize to Canadians for what he then did not consider, but now recognizes to have been, a "racist action." He also admitted there was a second photo of him in "blackface" from when he had participated in a high school talent show as a teenager.

The photos have provoked a political and media furor. Yesterday Trudeau suspended campaigning for Canada's October 21 federal election.

At a hastily organized press conference on an airport tarmac Wednesday night, Trudeau's principal opponent, Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer, said he was "extremely shocked and disappointed" and proclaimed Trudeau "not fit to run this country." Ignoring his own party's ties to extreme right-wing forces and the virulent campaign against refugees fleeing Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt, Scheer sanctimoniously declared, "Wearing brownface... is just as racist in 2001 as it is in 2019."



President

Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, joined by their delegation members, participate in a bilateral meeting at the Centre de Congrès Bellevue Sunday, Aug. 25, 2019, in Biarritz, France, site of the G7 Summit. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Yesterday, Scheer returned to the attack, denouncing Trudeau for “lying” after Global News published a short video clip from the early 1990s, again showing Trudeau in blackface. Subsequently, Scheer admitted under questioning that his Conservative Party had passed on the video to Global News last week.

The corporate media has gone into overdrive, denouncing Trudeau for having failed to “come clean” and acknowledge the existence of these images prior to Wednesday, and accusing him of rank hypocrisy. Many of those who previously fawned over Trudeau, hailing him as Canada’s “diversity” prime minister, now claim to be scandalized by his behavior.

The working class has every reason to oppose Trudeau and his trade union-backed Liberal government. It is a right-wing, big business government, which has imposed austerity, cutting tens of billions from health care, ordered a more than 70 percent hike in military spending by 2026, and further integrated Canada into Washington’s incendiary military-strategic offensives against China, Russia and in the oil-rich Middle East, any of which could result in a catastrophic world war.

However, the working class must oppose the Trudeau government from its own class standpoint and without becoming ensnared in the intrigues and provocations of Trudeau’s big business political opponents.

The “blackface scandal” is a manufactured, made-to-order political provocation. It is contrived out of decades-old incidents and seeks to leverage the racial identity politics assiduously cultivated by the “liberal-left” faction of the ruling class and the sensationalist, moral absolutist climate fostered by the reactionary #MeToo campaign.

This pseudo-scandal is being weaponized by a substantial faction of the bourgeoisie that has soured on Trudeau. This is because they deem him insufficiently ruthless in implementing their class war agenda. In a parallel attempt to use scandal-mongering to destabilize the government and push politics still further right, this faction has also sought to frame the election as a referendum on Liberal corruption, citing Trudeau’s efforts to rewrite and manipulate the law to stop the criminal prosecution of the Quebec-based engineering giant SNC-Lavalin.

Already, over the past 15 months, Canada’s ruling elite has propelled to power in three of the country’s four most populous provinces—Ontario, Quebec and Alberta—governments led by right-wing populists that are gutting public services and workers' rights, and, in the case of Quebec’s CAQ government, have passed chauvinist legislation targeting Muslims and other religious minorities.

The political potency of the “blackface scandal” is bound up with Trudeau’s own relentless promotion of identity politics. While enforcing the dictates of big business, Trudeau has trumpeted his government’s commitment to gender, racial and ethnic “diversity” in cabinet, the military, other institutions of the capitalist state, academia, and the top ranks of corporate management. His foreign minister, the war hawk Chrystia Freeland, implements a “feminist foreign policy” in which she connives with the likes of US Vice-President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in plotting the overthrow of Venezuela’s elected government.

The Liberals’ ostensibly progressive identity politics agenda is aimed at cultivating an upper-middle class constituency that seeks greater access to power and privilege within the top 1 and 10 percent. Above all, it is directed against the working class, at dividing workers under conditions where, in Canada as around the world, they are increasingly asserting their independent class interests in mass social struggles.

Workers must beware. The trumped-up scandal against Trudeau is also being used to trivialize the Conservatives’ ties to far-right forces. The Liberals, for their own cynical election purposes, have been highlighting Conservative candidates’ old xenophobic, anti-

abortion and racist social media postings. Now the corporate media, or at least much of it, is arguing all this should be discounted given Trudeau's own "sins."

The reality, however, is that in Canada, as in all the advanced capitalist countries, extreme-right forces are emerging from within the traditional establishment parties. The Conservatives' national campaign director and former organizer of Scheer's 2017 leadership campaign, Hamish Marshall, was previously a director of the far-right, Calgary-based Rebel Media, which promotes the British neofascist Tommy Robinson. Maxime Bernier, who led Scheer on all but the final, 13th ballot in the Conservative Party leadership race, is running for reelection as the head of the newly founded People's Party of Canada, which denounces "mass immigration" as a threat to Canadian society. Last fall Scheer's mentor, the former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, published a book that argued for "dialogue" with far-right parties so as to combat what he described as the real threat: "socialism."

Trudeau claims to oppose right-wing populism. But the "liberal" wing of the ruling elite has nurtured the ground for its growth with its wars and never-ending assault on the working class. Moreover, it is similarly turning to authoritarian methods of rule.

Trudeau has bent over backwards to work closely with Trump, and his closest allies in defending the "liberal democratic order" are French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The former has normalized "emergency powers" and used massive police violence to impose sweeping attacks on the working class. Merkel, for her part, is implementing the anti-immigrant policies of the neofascist AfD and resurrecting the "world power" politics of German imperialism that led to the most horrific crimes of the last century.

Under conditions of ever-deepening world capitalist breakdown, a reelected Trudeau government would rapidly come into headlong conflict with the working class. As already demonstrated by their criminalization of the 2018 postal workers' strike and their expansion of the powers of the intelligence agencies, the Liberals will resort to repression if their trade union allies prove unable to contain working class opposition.

The trade unions and social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) are deeply discredited, having systematically suppressed the class struggle for decades, imposed massive wage and job cuts and connived in the dismantling of public services.

More and more struggles are erupting outside their control, including numerous protests against the Ford government in Ontario, the 2018 "illegal" Quebec crane operators' strike,

and work stoppages organized in defiance of Unifor against the impending closure of GM's Oshawa assembly plant.

The vital task is to impart a socialist internationalist perspective to the incipient upsurge of the working class. The diverse struggles of workers and youth against austerity, concessions and war must be fused into a working class industrial and political offensive. This offensive must be aimed at bringing to power a workers' government committed to socialist policies and uniting the struggles of Canadian workers with the growing global working class upsurge, including the current strike of nearly 50,000 American GM workers.

To prosecute this struggle, a revolutionary working class party must be built as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International: the Socialist Equality Party (Canada).

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