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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Roger Jordan

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Canadian unions urge pro-war Trudeau government to push for a “ceasefire” in Gaza

Protests against Israel’s genocidal onslaught on the Palestinians in Gaza—and the complicity of the imperialist powers—have been building across Canada, as around the world, for the past two weeks. Last weekend saw the largest demonstrations yet, with over 4,000 mainly young people protesting in Toronto on Saturday and a mobilization of like size in Montreal the next day.

A significant feature of the protests has been condemnation of the Biden administration and the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government. Washington has rushed billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, deployed two additional aircraft-carrier battle groups to the region and repeatedly threatened Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah with “devastating consequences” if they try to halt Gaza’s destruction. Ottawa, for its part, has given full-throated support to Israeli war crimes. These include depriving Gaza’s 2.3 million citizens of all food, water and energy, ordering mass civilian evacuations, and targeting hospitals and other public infrastructure.



Part of the Oct. 21 Toronto demonstration denouncing the Canadian-US backed Israeli onslaught on Gaza's Palestinians

Under these conditions, a coalition of trade unions, “social justice” groups and faith-based organizations have stepped forward with an appeal for a ceasefire. Endorsed by some dozen major union bodies—including Unifor, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Montreal labour councils of the Quebec Federation of Labour and the Confederation of National Trade Unions—the mealy-mouthed October 21 statement is aimed at confining the mounting opposition to the imperialist-backed onslaught on the Palestinian people to futile appeals to the Liberal government to press for a “ceasefire.”

The statement begins by deploring, in a detached and supposedly neutral tone, “the violence in Israel-Palestine” and its escalation “towards an all-out war,” thereby suggesting that Hamas and the Israeli state are equally responsible for the genocidal violence now being visited upon the Palestinians of Gaza. In this vein, the unions declare, “Since October 7, thousands have been killed following Hamas’ attack and the Israeli government’s response.”

The statement manages to mention the bombing of the al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza in which hundreds perished without naming Israel as the perpetrator—a clear concession to the vile war propaganda being churned out by the Netanyahu regime and its western allies that blames a supposed misdirected Islamic Jihad rocket for the war crime.

One would have no inkling from the statement that Israel has imposed a blockade on Gaza for the past 17 years, turning it into an “open-air prison,” let alone systematically

oppressed the Palestinians for three-quarters of a century since over a million were ethnically-cleansed to make way for the establishment of the Israeli state. To condemn “violence” on both sides under these conditions is to cover-up for and side with the oppressor. Hamas’ October 7 attack was a mass uprising by an oppressed people, an uprising the far-right Netanyahu government has responded to—in wanton disregard for international law—with acts of savagery and collective punishment akin to those perpetrated by the Nazi regime.

The unions’ distorted portrayal of the conflict is inseparable from their close political alliance with the Trudeau Liberal government, which they helped elect in 2015. The governmental alliance between the Canadian Labour Congress-sponsored New Democrats (NDP) and the minority Liberals, formed to strengthen the government as Canada joined the US-led war on Russia, has bound the unions even more tightly to the pro-war Trudeau government.

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This becomes even clearer when one examines the timid demands the statement advances. Tellingly, several of these demands are framed as endorsements of what the pro-war Trudeau government is already doing.

The statement’s signatories humbly “call on the government of Canada to take these steps”:

- “Call for an immediate ceasefire of hostilities in Israel-Palestine.”
- “Call for an end to the blockade of Gaza and for the restoration of humanitarian aid and access to the basic necessities of life.”
- “We endorse the Canadian government’s call for humanitarian aid to Gaza and the safe return of hostages.”

Strikingly, the union-endorsed statement contains not a single word of criticism of the Trudeau government or Canadian imperialism.

No mention is made of the fact that Trudeau and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly have repeatedly justified the criminal actions of the Israeli state, including the siege of Gaza, by saying Israel has a “right” and a “duty” to “defend itself.”

Nor is there any reference to Ottawa's efforts, second in recent years only to that of the US, to shield Israel from all criticism at the United Nations for its systematic oppression of the Palestinians; or to the burgeoning ties between the Canadian Armed Forces and the Israeli Defence Forces.

Canada's steadfast support for Israel is cemented by its more than three-quarter-century old and ever-expanding military-strategic partnership with the United States. For Ottawa, like Washington, Israel serves as a garrison state in the Middle East to advance the interests of American and Canadian imperialism.

More broadly, the Trudeau government, with the full support of its trade union and New Democratic Party allies, has vastly expanded military spending and positioned Canada as a major player in the US-led war on Russia in Ukraine and its military-strategic offensive against China.

Over the weekend, while protesters took to the streets in cities across Canada to oppose Israel's onslaught on Gaza, the Trudeau government took further steps to demonstrate its full support. On Saturday, Defence Minister Bill Blair announced that an "independent investigation" by the Canadian military had determined "with a high degree of confidence" that Israel was not responsible for the bombing of the al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza. The next day, Trudeau issued a joint statement with the United States, which for decades has armed Israel to the teeth, and the European imperialist powers that "reiterated their support for Israel and its right to defend itself against terrorism."

One must either be a political know-nothing or engaged in deliberate deception to believe that demands for a "peaceful" solution to the conflict can be addressed to such a government. In the case of the union leaderships, who have decades of experience in smothering working class opposition to the ruling elite's policies of austerity and war, the latter is true. They are determined to corral the growing opposition among workers and young people to the Zionist state's war on Gaza behind pathetic appeals to the "progressive" Liberal government, so as to prevent them from turning to a socialist program to overcome the national, religious and ethnic divisions intentionally stoked by imperialism in the Middle East.

The release of the union-backed statement calling for a "ceasefire" came the day after 33 MPs, including 23 from the Liberal caucus, eight NDP MPs, and two Greens had made a similar appeal to Trudeau in an open letter. It declared, "Canada has long been a voice for peace. The longer this conflict goes on, the more innocent civilians will pay with their

lives. We demand that Canada join the growing international call for an immediate ceasefire.”

Even this meek appeal that sought to revive the fraudulent image of Canadian imperialism as a “peacekeeper” was too much for the right-wing Conservatives and Bloc Québécois, none of whose MPs signed their names to it. On Monday, the Bloc shifted its position and issued its own call for a ceasefire. But it stressed that any halt to the fighting should only be “temporary,” to allow for aid deliveries, i.e., Israel must have Canada’s support in launching a scorched earth ground invasion at a time of its choosing.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, whose party provides the parliamentary votes necessary to secure Trudeau his governing majority, issued his own letter Monday to the Prime Minister calling on the government to push for a ceasefire. In even more tempered language than the union bureaucrats, Singh wrote, “I am asking for an urgent meeting between us to discuss how we can work together to end the bloodshed with a ceasefire, get Canadians out of the region, ensure the safe return of all hostages, and insist that international law be respected.” Underscoring his party’s firm backing for the Israeli regime’s onslaught, he began his letter with a sharp denunciation of Hamas’ “terrorist attack” on October 7, suggesting that this was the origin of the conflict.

The NDP’s bitter hostility to any genuine support for the oppressed Palestinian people was glaringly exposed by the fate of Sarah Jama, an NDP member of the Ontario legislature. On October 10, Jama issued a statement calling for an “end to all occupation of Palestinian land” and an immediate ceasefire. The statement prompted a torrent of criticism and abuse from the hard-right Tory government led by Doug Ford, the corporate-controlled media, and the Ontario NDP leadership. They were outraged at Jama’s refusal to toe the line by denouncing the Hamas attack as a “terrorist” operation.

Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles announced Monday that Jama had been kicked out of the NDP caucus. With breathtaking cynicism, Stiles accused Jama of having created an “unsafe work environment” for staff members, because pro-Israeli elements whipped up the Ford government and the likes of the *Toronto Sun* have made threatening phone calls to NDP offices. Needless to say, Stiles’ statement had nothing to say about the massive loss of life and growing humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, all of which is being facilitated by the support her party is extending to the Trudeau Liberal government.

The NDP booted Jama from its caucus on the same day the Ford government passed a sweeping motion of censure against her in the provincial legislature. As a result, Jama is now forbidden from speaking in the chamber unless and until she apologizes to the

provincial parliament and retracts her initial October 10 statement defending the Palestinian people.

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