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Canada touts military-strategic alliance with

Washington to win exemption from Trump's tariffs

American President Donald Trump's announcement of an exemption for Canada from new US tariffs on steel and aluminum imports highlights Ottawa's intimate military-strategic partnership with US imperialism and the determination of Justin Trudeau's Liberal government to line up with Washington in its preparations for economic and military conflict with its main rivals, above all China.

Trump confirmed the exemption last Thursday as he announced, in the name of "national security," the imposition of 25 and 10 percent tariffs respectively on all steel and aluminum imports.

Trump's tariffs represent a major step in dismantling the "liberal" global trade order Washington long championed, and have provoked warnings from government and business leaders around the globe that the world risks becoming embroiled in trade war.

Trump's exemption for Canada and fellow North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) partner Mexico, is not without a hitch, however. The White House has indicated its continuation is tied to a "successful" and speedy outcome of the ongoing talks to renegotiate NAFTA. In other words, Washington intends to use it as leverage in compelling Ottawa and Mexico City to bow to its NAFTA demands. These include: dramatically limiting Canadian and Mexican access to US government procurement contracts; a 50 percent US content and 85 percent North American content requirements for automobiles to be tariff-free; and the dismantling of Canadian barriers on dairy and poultry imports.

At the same time, the exemption underscores that a key aim of Washington is to fashion NAFTA into an even more overtly protectionist trade bloc directed against Washington's economic and military competitors, China and Russia, but also against the European powers, especially Germany.

The Trump administration is calling on Ottawa to ensure Canada is not used by Chinese and other overseas steel and aluminum producers as a "back door" to the US, and Ottawa has been quick to signal that it is more than ready to comply and otherwise help Washington in fighting its trade rivals.

The Canadian ruling establishment greeted Trump's announcement of an exemption for Ottawa with a mixture of relief and enthusiasm.

Since World War II, Canadian imperialism has pursued its predatory interests around the world chiefly through its close strategic partnership with Washington. During the past quarter century, Canadian military forces have participated in virtually every aggressive US-led war around the world.

In her speech accompanying the release of the Liberal government's new defence policy last year, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland applauded the "outsized role" played by US imperialism in the post-war era and pledged Canada would do more to support its closest ally under conditions where Washington can no longer maintain North American global hegemony alone.

This was the principal argument Trudeau and his government officials made in lobbying Washington for an exemption for Canadian steel and aluminum. According to media reports, the key conversations in winning a Canadian exemption were when Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan told Secretary of Defense James Mattis that the US relies on Canadian steel to manufacture its fighter jets, and Trudeau's March 5 pledge to Trump he would ensure "Canadian steel" was manufactured in "Canadian plants" by "Canadian workers."

Trudeau has stepped up his government's pro-militarist and anti-China rhetoric this week as he conducts a tour of steel and aluminum plants in Quebec, Ontario and Saskatchewan aimed at posturing as a defender of "Canadian jobs." "We are very concerned about the actions taken by China and the dumping of steel and aluminum on the global market," he declared, in remarks that could just as well have come from Trump. "Canada is already extremely active in preventing the arrival of dumped steel or aluminum from the global markets, specifically China, onto our territory."

The Prime Minister went on to emphasize the crucial role that Canada, which is the largest supplier of steel and aluminum to the US market, plays in supporting the US war machine. “Canadian aluminum is in your fighter jets. Canadian steel is in your tanks,” he said, in remarks delivered just kilometers from the Canadian Armed Forces Bagotville air base, which was established in World War II to protect Canada’s strategically significant aluminum industry. “There is no better security partner in the world ... So that whole issue of national security is off the table.”

Trudeau, Freeland and other government officials have boasted that securing the tariff exemption required a “Team Canada” effort. This included the Official Opposition Conservative Party, which welcomed the maintenance of free access to the US market for Canadian steel and aluminum. However, Conservative foreign affairs critic Erin O’Toole urged the Trudeau government to go even further, declaring that Canada has to align its interests even more closely with the US in order to retain the bilateral strategic partnership. O’Toole said this should include joining the US ballistic missile defence shield. BMD, its name notwithstanding, is aimed at developing the means for Washington to wage a “winnable” nuclear war, and is directed chiefly at Russia and China.

Of even greater political significance is the role that the New Democrats, Canada’s nominal social democratic party, and the trade unions, are playing in championing economic nationalism and protectionism.

Tracey Ramsey, the NDP’s international trade critic, applauded Canada’s “full court press” to secure the exemptions. Said Ramsey, “This has been a group effort at a grassroots level of just some intense education, I believe, about the Canadian component (to US manufacturing and security).”

Unifor President Jerry Dias urged the Liberal government to stand up to Trump’s “trade blackmail,” a reference to his attempt to use the exemption as leverage in rewriting NAFTA. Dias had earlier called on Trudeau to walk away from the NAFTA talks if Canada was not exempted from the steel and aluminum tariffs.

Canada’s union bureaucracy has systematically promoted nationalism for more than three decades as a means of smothering the class struggle and dividing Canadian workers from their class allies in the US and internationally. Unifor, in particular, has imposed round after round of concession and job cuts in the name of defending “Canadian jobs.”

Dias and other top union bureaucrats praised Trump for his reopening of NAFTA, claiming that his push to strengthen a North American protectionist trade bloc opened up opportunities to secure a “better deal” for workers. In truth, the talks have served to

demonstrate the further integration of the entire union bureaucracy with the capitalist state, with Dias functioning as an official adviser to the government at every stage in the renegotiation.

The United Steelworkers (USW), which represents workers in both Canada and the US, has welcomed the US tariffs, while urging Trump to make Canada's exemption permanent. Ken Neumann, the USW Canadian director, declared, "Our union has led the labour movement in taking the message to the White House that Canada is not the problem."

Marty Warren, USW director for Ontario and Atlantic Canada, was even more explicit, providing a stamp of approval to Trump's reactionary resort to national security considerations to launch an investigation into imported steel. "The evidence confirmed there are many countries that engage in unfair, illegal and predatory trading practices that have created a global steel glut and depressed prices affecting all steel and aluminum markets," he asserted. "These 'bad actor' countries, including China, Egypt, India, Malaysia, Korea, Russia, Turkey and Vietnam, have harmed the entire North American market. Canada is not one of these bad actors."

To underscore the point, the USW appealed to the Trudeau government to "take action to prevent a surge of steel and aluminum imports into Canada as a result of US tariffs," i.e. to fall into line with the Trump administration's reactionary protectionist trade war agenda that is intensifying tensions between the world's major powers and laying the basis for future military conflicts.

The trade unions are pursuing a similar policy in every country. In the United States, Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO hailed the tariffs as a "step forward" in the battle against economic "cheaters."

The unions' incitement of economic nationalism, and the rise of militarism and the danger of war that accompanies it, is the logical consequence of their anti-working class, pro-capitalist policies.

As the Socialist Equality Party warned in its recent statement "Oppose Trudeau and Trump, the Canada-US alliance and Imperialist War," "Workers must beware: those who today wave Canadian and Quebec flags, inciting workers to align with their bosses against Mexican and Chinese workers, will on the morrow be the recruiting sergeants for war."