

Convoy rolling into Ottawa is about more than just vaccine mandates for truckers (Trucker-Protest)

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OTTAWA — Dozens of big rigs rolled into downtown Ottawa Friday, as a planned protest began to swell in size and energy, and some in attendance promised to stay put until vaccine mandates are abolished or Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is forced from office.

But what some believe to be a demonstration in support of truckers opposed to a cross-border vaccine mandate is, in fact, a much broader push to end all COVID-19 restrictions. It is rooted in a movement that goes at least as far back as the last time a convoy of trucks rallied on Parliament Hill.

Smaller groups of protesters have been staging events around Ottawa, including outside what they seemed to think was Trudeau's home, for months.

While police have warned their intelligence is flagging the potential for violence, the atmosphere Friday in the early hours of the demonstration was more carnival than combat.

The noise at times was overwhelming, with people cheering, car horns blaring, music blasting and vehicles circling in a constant parade. Expletive-laden signs and decals targeting Trudeau were a dominant theme around downtown.

While some commercial trucks were around, the vast majority of vehicles were still personal cars and pickup trucks.

By late afternoon at least 1,000 people lined the road, sidewalks and lawn in front of Centre Block, some setting up barbecues and others looking to camp out in their vehicles. The sharp scent of marijuana hovered over much of the scene.

“This is a love-in,” said Dana-Lee Melfi. “It's like I'm in the '70s. We are going to show the world how to get this stuff started.”

Melfi, dressed head to toe in camouflage, said he lives in the Ontario “bush” and would camp out in Ottawa for weeks if necessary until the mandates end.

Others want more than that.

Robyn May, a business owner from Long Point, Ont., said she plans to stay until “Justin Trudeau is no longer our prime minister.”

“We are not a free country,” May said, adding her business had been forced to close at times because of government orders.

As dusk settled, the protest began to spill out of Parliament Hill toward the ByWard Market and down other city streets. Hundreds more vehicles were expected by Saturday, from Western Canada, Quebec and the Maritimes.

As evening fell, commercial rigs lined the road, double file, their lights glaring in the darkness, their horns blaring.

More convoys are expected Saturday.

In Rigaud, Que., near the Ontario border, a heavy police presence watched convoy supporters amass at a truck stop. Some were there to support, while others were headed to Ottawa, demanding “freedom.”

Peter Julius said what started about trucking has morphed into something more, in his opinion, with a message to government that lockdowns and mandates are excessive and unnecessary.

“People are tired, that's what it comes down to,” said Julius, a father of three from Saint-Lazare, Que., who attended with his children.

“Canada's a free country and it feels like we're stuck in prison. Yes, we're free, but we're limited to what we can do, we're limited to see our family, who we can have over.”

“It's not a way to live,” he added.

The sentiments reflect the fact the protest is not specifically about truckers or the vaccine mandate imposed on them, and in reality it didn't even start out that way. The Jan. 15 decision to extend the vaccine mandate at the border to commercial truck drivers poured gasoline on a fire already raging among an angry segment of Canadians. They have been protesting COVID-19 restrictions for almost two years, but also have other grievances with the government over climate action and energy policy.

The convoy is mainly organized by a movement known as Canada Unity, which launched on Facebook in February 2019, when the United We Roll convoy protested on Parliament Hill, demanding more oil pipelines and an end to the carbon price.

The memo being pushed by Canada Unity unlawfully demands Gov. Gen. Mary Simon and the Senate force the federal and provincial governments to lift all COVID-19 restrictions, including vaccine mandates. It does not mention truckers, and was initially sent to the Senate and Simon on Dec. 11.

While the federal government has imposed a vaccine mandate for federally regulated workers and at the border, almost all COVID-19 restrictions fall to provincial jurisdiction. That includes mask mandates, business and school closures, and other public and private gathering limits.

In the last two years Canada Unity founder James Bauder has posted multiple times on Facebook about government and media conspiracies pushing a fake COVID-19 narrative, and a year ago predicted it would lead to World War III by last February.

The group's Facebook page was suspended in the fall for pushing false and potentially dangerous information about COVID-19.

Bauder launched his own GoFundMe campaign to raise funds for a convoy in mid-October, that raised about \$20,000 to date, separate from the one launched on the website Jan. 14 that has now raised more than \$7 million. He and his wife have been travelling the country leading various protests.

Videos posted by Canada Unity to online-video platform Rumble show events throughout the fall in Ottawa, with group members blockading Ottawa-area media buildings, screaming about freedom while standing maskless inside the entrance to the National Arts Centre and staging a mask protest inside a downtown Dollarama store, which drew a verbal altercation with police. In both December and mid-January, the group brought convoys of cars to the traffic circle near the Rideau Hall gate to shout at Trudeau.

The prime minister and his family live in a cottage on the property well back from the convoy's position and not in the gate house some in the group seemed to think was his home.

The Canada Trucking Alliance has disavowed the latest protest and said most of its members are vaccinated and are continuing to do their jobs.

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole posted on Twitter Friday that he met with truckers headed to Ottawa. "Truckers are our neighbours, our family, and most importantly, they are our fellow Canadians," he wrote.

While the atmosphere has been non-violent, though loud and raucous, so far, Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly said more intelligence warning of the potential for violence is still coming in.

"Even during the course of this conference call we've had new intelligence coming in, in regards to local threats," he said during a briefing Friday morning.

He said Ottawa police are working with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, RCMP and other agencies to identify any potential threats to public safety.

"That will continue and we will be as prepared as possible to identify those individuals or groups that may seek to come here physically to cause harm to the city, to disrupt lawful demonstrations, or that may be inciting hate and/or criminal violence online," he said.

But many who spoke to reporters on Parliament Hill Friday expressed anger that their push to end COVID-19 restrictions had them labelled as extremists. Others were angry that it appeared people with far-right connections and links to white supremacist groups were trying to latch on to the protest.

Andrew Broe, who drove in his red rig from Trenton, Ont., with his girlfriend, said the extremists were not part of the movement, but that it was "very frustrating" to hear reports they might be "trying to infiltrate" the rally.

Earlier this week the larger GoFundMe campaign hosts asked anyone involved to report signs of hatred or violence.

But at least one organizer, Pat King, said on a Facebook Live post in December that the situation with COVID-19 mandates was so out of control "the only way that this is going to be solved is with bullets."

There are currently rallies officially planned for Saturday and Sunday but many are not looking to leave in just a few days.

Ashley Piche, a 33-year-old life coach, was part of a large group from Sudbury, Ont. She said she was planning to stay for around a week to "hold it down."

She said she is “not an anti-vaxxer” but did not want to be part of an “experimental” vaccine and should have the freedom to choose whether to get vaccinated.

This report by The Canadian Press was first published Jan. 28, 2022.

— With files from Sidhartha Banerjee in Rigaud, Que.