

Thousands gather on Parliament hill for massive protest against vaccine mandates (Trucker-Protest)

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OTTAWA — Trucks jamming Ottawa streets shut down the core of the national capital on Saturday as a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd packed Parliament Hill to demand the federal Liberal government end vaccine mandates and COVID-19 restrictions, promising to stay for as long as needed to fulfill their goals.

The sounds of honking horns echoed around downtown from vehicles parked and idling in front of the parliamentary buildings, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office and the National War Memorial as protesters weaved between the semis and personal vehicles parked for blocks.

By the afternoon, the swell of traffic forced police to close streets and warn there was no longer room for vehicles downtown, other than first responders.

Eschewing masks and holding signs proclaiming the need for freedom, some protesters were seen carrying copies of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Still others brandished expletive-laden signs targeting Trudeau.

Parliament Hill was awash in cold air and the unmistakable smell of marijuana as protesters outlined a range of concerns with COVID-19 restrictions. Those concerns went well beyond the initial focus of the event: to oppose vaccine mandates for truck drivers crossing the Canada-U.S. border.

“This is a lot more than just COVID. This is about control (and) tyranny,” said Luke Winkels, who said he opted for early retirement once he needed to be vaccinated to drive his truck across the border.

“This has brought people's true feelings out. It's not going back in the box again.”

The weekend-long rally had led the Parliamentary Protective Service to expect as many as 10,000 protesters, with local police getting reinforcements from other municipal forces, the Ontario Provincial Police and RCMP to handle the crowd until it dispersed.

But by late Saturday, it wasn't clear when that would happen.

Several in attendance, such as Winkels, vowed to stay parked by Parliament until vaccine mandates and public-health restrictions are lifted. Others wanted Trudeau forced out as prime minister, or chided him for not meeting with demonstrators to hear their concerns.

“We need to fix this. We've got this amount of momentum going,” said Karen Klus, who said she came from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., due to frustration over ongoing restrictions that have left her without work as a meeting planner in the travel industry.

Phil Powers, a truck driver from Oshawa, Ont., who parked his trailer truck in front of Parliament Hill for the weekend, was less optimistic that the government would fold to demands:

“It's a nice thought, but I don't think anything will happen immediately,” he said.

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

Not all those assembled downtown were opposed to public health measures.

“Masks are important, vaccines are important, and mandates are important only because we need them to stay alive and not fill our hospitals up,” said Phil Haggart, who came to deliver a pro-vaccine message, as protesters rang cow bells close by.

But some politicians threw their support behind the demonstrators, including Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe. He issued a statement on Saturday vowing to end his province's proof-of-vaccination policy “in the not-too-distant future.” He also said the cross-border vaccine requirement made no sense and voiced support for calls to repeal it.

The border rule, announced in November, took effect this month alongside a reciprocal American policy. Since the American requirement kicked in one week ago, the number of trucks crossing the border fell by just under five per cent compared with the same week one year earlier, based on statistics from Public Safety Canada.

Previous estimates indicated the vaccination mandate would affect about one-tenth of Canada's cross-border truckers, such as Winkels. His compatriots in Ottawa said they were stocked with food, ready to sleep in their cabs and were receiving donations and gift cards to help them through an extended stay downtown.

Former U.S. president Donald Trump, speaking Saturday in Texas at one of his trademark rallies, shouted out the protests briefly as he urged the crowd to reject vaccine mandates in all their forms.

In “resisting bravely” what he called “lawless” mandates, truckers in Canada “are doing more to defend American freedom than our own leaders, by far,” Trump said.

“We are with them all the way. They have really shown something.”

While the mood of attendees was largely jovial and peaceful on Saturday, there were flashes of the simmering tension that has kept the city on edge in recent days. Some in the crowd waved Confederate flags or held signs with Nazi symbols or references.

Maverick Ontario politician Randy Hillier tweeted a video of himself trying to get past parliamentary security, saying they should open up Parliament Hill “or we might have to open it up for ourselves.”

A memo being pushed by Canada Unity, the group that mainly planned the convoy, unlawfully demands Gov. Gen. Mary Simon and the Senate force 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.

Still, Canada Unity organizer Patrick King used an afternoon speech to argue that politicians would have to listen to their concerns as he spoke from a flatbed in view of Trudeau's office and Parliament Hill.

“To finally see you guys stand up and say, ‘no,’ is the most amazing thing I've seen yet,” said King, who has also been called out in the past for espousing misinformation about COVID-19.

The Canadian Trucking Alliance said many in the crowd had no connection to the trucking industry and were there to push a separate agenda.

In part of the statement directed at truckers in attendance, the alliance said their actions would affect the “majority of your colleagues from coast-to-coast who do not share your opinion but share your passion for the industry and country.”

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— With files from Laura Osman and Mia Rabson