

TEMPEST

How should the Left respond to Trump's threats against Canada?

by **David Camfield**

Tempest member David Camfield argues that international solidarity, labor and social movement organizing—and a socialist alternative to capitalist competition and nationalism—are how to respond to Trump's bullying. Faced with nationalist pressure to defend Canada, we must not align with any capitalist nation-state but rather see ourselves in solidarity against all of them.

Donald Trump's recent threat to impose 100 percent tariffs on Canada if it "makes a deal with China" is making more people in the Canadian state¹ worry about his "America First" administration's bullying. Some also fear that in the future, Trump might try to act on his past talk about Canada becoming part of the U.S.

This fear can easily lead people to support the “elbows up” Liberal Party federal [government headed by Mark Carney](https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/crisis-as-class-strategy/) in spite of its commitment to austerity targeting public services and the workers who deliver them, expanding fossil fuel extraction and mining, implementing anti-migrant policies, and dramatically boosting spending on the military. To help us navigate these increasingly stormy political waters, the Left needs a compass.

While Trump is unlikely to follow through on his latest tariff threat, we can expect that this won't be the last time that his administration or a more coherent future MAGA government in Washington uses economic pressure to try to get Ottawa to comply with its desires. So, how should the Left respond to “trade war” or other forms of economic friction between the two countries?

John Clarke [lays out](https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/from-trade-war-to-class-war/) the basic approach:

The working class has to operate in a context that is dominated by its class enemies. We didn't generate the rivalries among them or draw the borders between states, but we have to advance our interests under the conditions imposed upon us. Our class has nothing to gain from the trade war and no responsibility to find solutions for Canadian capitalism. Our viewpoint should be shaped by hostility to 'our' capitalists and robust solidarity with workers in the U.S. and Mexico.

People in the U.S. and Mexico should adopt the same viewpoint: hostility to their employers and working-class solidarity across borders. International solidarity, not competition!

Our viewpoint should be shaped by hostility to “our” capitalists and robust solidarity with workers in the U.S. and Mexico.

Helping “our” bosses and governments compete with their rivals in other countries is a road to lower wages, worse jobs, weaker workplace rights, social programs, and environmental protections, and attacks on the rights of Indigenous nations. Once we accept that capitalist goal, anything seen as a barrier to higher profits becomes a problem. Nationalist fervor also leads to more hostility—often racist—against anyone who’s “unpatriotic” or who “doesn’t belong.”

The federal Liberals’ approach to the Trump administration, “despite being represented as the alternative to U.S. dominance... in fact mirrors core elements of Trumpism. It proposes a militarized economy that will require the gutting of social, education and health services,” as James Cairns and Alan Sears **point out** (https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/opinion-cairns-trump/article_5e5a8394-a028-5fd4-adde-983abdada50c.html). Any meaningful left politics must oppose and organize against this, “refus[ing] to reproduce Trump’s agenda of militarization, resource extraction and attacks on working–class people.” https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/opinion-cairns-trump/article_5e5a8394-a028-5fd4-adde-983abdada50c.html

It can’t be said too often that it’s not the Left’s job to help Canadian business owners or whoever governs in Ottawa. Our task is to foster the power of unions and social movements to defend people against them and fight for a better world, with the ultimate aim of revolutionizing the society they rule. We shouldn’t propose policies to help them manage capitalism. Instead, “The left must develop

and fight for an alternative political and economic vision,” as Todd Gordon [argues \(https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/we-need-workers-solidarity-not-national-unity-in-response-to-trumps-tariffs\)](https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/we-need-workers-solidarity-not-national-unity-in-response-to-trumps-tariffs).

When economic turbulence hits, we should fight for better income support measures for [laid-off workers. \(https://www.justice4workers.org/tariffcrisis\)](https://www.justice4workers.org/tariffcrisis) We should challenge workplace closures, inspired by the example of Ex-GKN workers in Italy: Faced with layoffs, they occupied their car parts plant and have been campaigning for its conversion into a [workers' cooperative \(https://notesfrombelow.org/article/ex-gkn-florence-the-factory-collective-relaunches\)](https://notesfrombelow.org/article/ex-gkn-florence-the-factory-collective-relaunches) that would recycle solar panels and make cargo bikes.

We should demand the creation of well-paying secure public sector jobs as part of a radical Green New Deal, along with other reforms that chip away at social and ecological injustice. In Gordon's words, “Such an agenda... can be realized only if we develop a strategy centred on mass struggle, and only if we refuse to limit our collective vista to the defence of Canada.”

That's how the Left should respond to economic bullying by the U.S. But what about any future U.S. moves to alter the political relationship between the U.S. and Canadian states?

The first thing that needs to be said is that despite Trump's bluster, it's very unlikely that the U.S. will try to annex Canada. There would be a lot of downsides to annexation for a MAGA government even if the new arrangement gave Canada a status similar to Puerto Rico's, in which citizens wouldn't have the right to vote in U.S. elections. MAGA leaders definitely wouldn't want nearly 30 million new eligible voters, most of whom would support public health care, same-gender marriage, abortion rights, trans rights, and other rights that the far right hates. Fearmongering about a U.S. invasion and annexation has bad effects: it stokes Canadian nationalism and makes people more likely to accept whatever the government in Ottawa says it needs to do for the good of Canada.

Less unlikely than annexation but still improbable is a future U.S. move to impose some kind of political arrangement short of annexation that formally ties the hands of the government in Ottawa in some ways, rather than just relying on economic pressure to get what it wants.

Even if they're improbable, the Left needs to have an orientation to such possibilities because of how many people in the Canadian state are talking about them.

In the U.S., it's obvious: The Left should oppose any and all such moves by Washington. They'd be imperialist aggression against a junior partner.

In the Canadian state, the starting point should be recognizing that the Canadian state is a settler-colonial capitalist society built on and sustaining the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. In addition, it is a state built through the conquest of what is now Quebec, which still does not have the right as a nation to freely determine its relationship to the multinational federation. Although most Canadian nationalists deny it, so-called Canada is also an **imperialist power** (<https://arpbooks.org/product/imperialist-canada/>) within the global capitalist order. The record of what Canadian companies and governments do in relation to countries of the Global South is damning.

Happily, more people on the Left at least partially grasp that the country we live in is a predator in relation to most of the people of the world than was the case during 1960s through the 1980s, the heyday of Canadian left-nationalism. It's when people consider Canada in relation to the much more powerful country to its south that they often lose perspective.

The first socialist principle that's relevant here is that in conflicts between imperialist powers like the U.S. and the Canadian state, the Left shouldn't back either side. What's true about conflicts between the U.S. and China or Russia over resources for their capitalists and the political influence of their governments is also true about conflicts between the U.S. and the Canadian state (or another country that's weaker than the U.S. but still in the imperialist tier of the global system).

From the standpoint of the working class and oppressed people globally, such conflicts can only be harmful. Aligning with Canada's rulers in their disputes with the U.S. is always to the detriment of working-class people here. "When elephants fight it's the grass that gets trampled," as the saying goes.

The first socialist principle that's relevant here is that in conflicts between imperialist powers like the U.S. and the Canadian state the Left shouldn't back either side.

This means that the Left shouldn't champion "Canadian sovereignty." Everyday people don't rule the Canadian state – the owners of corporations and top state officials make up the dominant class in this capitalist society. "Canadian sovereignty" is their rule, not ours. It's exercised at the expense of Indigenous nations, Quebec, and workers of every nation it touches.

Opposing annexation—incorporating one country into another by force—is also a socialist principle. It's not that we're in favor of defending nation-states, their borders, their flags, or their myths. Everyone who's against the power of capital should be an internationalist who aims to build solidarity between working-class people of every nation. Opposition to annexation is a basic question of democracy: the merger of countries should only happen when the people who live in them democratically decide to merge.

Opposition to annexation is a basic question of democracy: the merger of countries should only happen when the people who live in them democratically decide to merge.

Any future move by the U.S. to directly dominate the Canadian state—changing the relationship between what are now two independent states, one much more powerful than the other, with jurisdiction over societies that are extensively economically interconnected—or even annex it should be opposed by the Left. Why? Because its practical effects would include more attacks on social programs, union rights, equality rights, and other gains won by the past struggles of workers and oppressed people. In spite of being utterly inadequate from a socialist perspective, for the most part these are stronger north of the Canada–U.S. border than south of it.

Many workers, women, queer, trans, and racialized people who live north of the border know that conditions for people like them are worse in the U.S. They don't want to live in a country run by the hard-right Conservative Party of Canada who like a lot about MAGA politics even if they think it goes too far. They really don't want to live in a country much more subordinated to the U.S., let alone in an expanded U.S.A. Fear of their lives getting worse can easily lead them to buy into maple leaf nationalism and support the Liberals as a lesser evil than the Conservatives.

The Left should respond to that fear by organizing against what the Liberals are doing today to manage capitalism and by popularizing a radical alternative agenda. [Mostafa Henaway](https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/crisis-as-class-strategy/) (<https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/crisis-as-class-strategy/>) is right: “The strategic question now is how to build a mass, multiracial, working-class resistance to Carney at the scale required, capable of sustained confrontation.” (<https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/crisis-as-class-strategy/>).

We should also oppose, in an internationalist way, any future move by a far-right U.S. government for direct domination or annexation. If the U.S. ever makes such a move, people north of the border should rise up against the aggression with mass protests, strikes, and occupations and fight for a better society—not to defend the status quo—and call on everyone in the U.S. who’s against the far right to do the same. Such opposition mustn’t involve allying with any of Canada’s rulers. Instead, we would argue for it to be conducted in an internationalist spirit, fighting for a world in which ordinary people can flourish, a world of freedom and ecological rationality. Our allies are everyday people in the U.S. and elsewhere who are fighting the far right and the liberal capitalist decline that fuels it.

Opinions expressed in signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the Tempest Collective.

For more information, see “[About Tempest Collective](https://www.tempestmag.org/about/) (<https://www.tempestmag.org/about/>).”

Featured Image credit: [heblo](https://pixabay.com/illustrations/donald-trump-president-trump-usa-5155123/) (<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/donald-trump-president-trump-usa-5155123/>) and [Jude Joshua](https://pixabay.com/photos/canada-day-canada-flag-canada-red-5370632/) (<https://pixabay.com/photos/canada-day-canada-flag-canada-red-5370632/>); modified by Tempest.

David Camfield lives in Winnipeg, Canada and is a member of the Tempest Collective as well as of the editorial board of *Midnight Sun*. David's most recent book is *Red Flags: A Reckoning with Communism for the Future of the Left* (2025). David hosts the podcast **Victor's Children**.

