

France: Support for war, attacks on democratic rights

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French troops have been participating in the Afghanistan war since November 16.

The first contingent of 58 soldiers was sent from the French base at Istres. It has been tasked with securing the airport at Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, preparing the way for further troop deployments. As the troops were leaving, President Jacques Chirac said on television that he and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin had decided to “extend our contribution by sending additional combat aircraft”.

Chirac announced there were already 2,000 French soldiers and several Mirage IV fighters in the United Arab Emirates, which were conducting “intelligence and secret service operations”.

On November 13 in parliament, Prime Minister Jospin used the question of humanitarian aid to try and cover over France’s efforts to position itself in strategically important Central Asia. Speaking about the fall of Kabul, he said, “These events are positive, because they permit a new strategic progress and also open a new field of action in regard to humanitarian questions. The occupation of Mazar-e-Sharif, the fall of Kabul, the liberation of a certain number of northern provinces... open up a new field for humanitarian aid, which France, the other European countries, the international community and the UN want to use.”

France’s turn towards active and open participation in the Afghanistan war is directly connected with an attack on democracy at home. This was already made clear by the fact that the government consciously dispensed with a parliamentary vote over participation in the war.

On October 9, two days after the outbreak of the Afghanistan war, and contrary to previous announcements and what had happened during the Gulf and Balkans wars, Jospin categorically told the National Assembly that he would keep parliament up to date, but would not permit a vote. This was not a war like the Gulf or Balkans wars, the prime minister argued, but concerned a global conflict with international terrorism.

In response to question from the Green Party, Defence Secretary Alain Richard acknowledged on 15 November that there would be a hearing and a parliamentary debate, but these would not result in a vote. “The position of the government has not changed on this point”, he said.

French daily *Le Monde* commented, “Jospin is obviously afraid that such a procedure”—i.e. holding a parliamentary vote—would strengthen “the break up of the different components of the government coalition, which would receive the support of the Socialist Party [PS] and the right wing, but not the Communist Party [PCF] and the Greens. One can understand the political concerns of the prime

minister.”

The motives of the PCF and the Greens, who occasionally protest weakly against the rightward turn of the government, do not arise from any principled opposition to the war or allegiance to democracy. For example, the Green Party’s European parliamentary delegate Daniel Cohn-Bendit is an open advocate of this war. Rather, they are motivated by petty electoral considerations: next year sees presidential, parliamentary and local elections in France.

Like many other governments, Paris is also using the September 11 attacks to carry out long-held plans and substantially beef up the state apparatus under the banner of “internal security”.

On the night of September 12, the *Vigipirate* security plan, introduced in 1995 by Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppe in response to the threat from Algerian Islamists, was activated again. Rubbish bins on the streets of Paris were welded shut from fear of bombs. Under the *Vigipirate* plan, thousands of policemen, paramilitary CRS units and soldiers are now patrolling all the strategic places in Paris and other large cities.

Vigipirate “means the presence of a very large number of policemen, gendarmes and military in public places, particularly those with sizeable public traffic”, explained the Defence Secretary Alain Richard. It is “the logical and intelligent consequence” of terrorism.

In view of the extensive tasks being undertaken by the army both at home and abroad, the prime minister wants to introduce a new, additional 100,000-strong volunteer reserve. He announced November 17 that all young people, who wanted to “contribute to the defence” of France, could participate in a 14-day basic training programme next year. Compulsory military service was only abolished last year.

After the attacks in New York and Washington, the senate and parliament passed the “law for security in everyday life” (LSQ—loi sur la sécurité quotidienne) by a large majority, which was adopted on October 31.

This law grants wide-ranging powers to the state and sharply intrudes on the individual’s private sphere. This includes the use of dragnets, house searches even at the pre-investigation stage, the continuous monitoring of telecommunications, harsher immigration procedures and much more besides. It is particularly worth noting that private security agencies have been given far greater powers to engage in personal checks and luggage inspections in public places, and now may also carry out body searches.

The measures to monitor e-mail and Internet traffic are extensive: in the future, telecommunications companies must retain all the codes, which serve to identify their customers, for up to one year and hand these over to an examining magistrate if necessary. Official bodies have the right to use technical means to decode messages. Those

providing encryption facilities are obliged to supply their programmes to investigators on request.

The new law also seeks to barricade France against refugees. For example, the French police will be allowed to carry out passport checks throughout the entire Eurotunnel system, up to the British side.

The background to this is the dramatic events taking place near the entrance to the Eurotunnel, in the refugee camp at Sangatte near Calais. The British government wants to fine Eurotunnel for every "illegal immigrant" who makes it to the UK through the tunnel. The tunnel operators have been pushing the French government to introduce stricter measures on their side of Channel. According to Eurotunnel, some 100 people a day are detained near the tunnel entrance, there have been at least 30,000 incidents recorded this year. At least four people have died attempting to jump onto moving trains.

Although the government has tried to justify the new law by pointing to the situation after the September 11 attacks, in essence it means extending state controls over the whole of society, a project that the ruling elite in France has been pursuing for four years.

At the end of 1995, the French ruling class had been confronted with the shock of a general strike movement, which threatened to derail the control. In October 1997, shortly after Jospin entered office, his government adopted certain security points in its programme, e.g. the introduction of the *police de proximité* (neighbourhood police) and the *contrats locaux de sécurité* (local security contracts between the central government and the individual municipalities).

On the basis of these measures, the strongly centralised French state apparatus has been extended through a network of local control arrangements, for example, using the suburban traffic system to introduce a network of private security guards and video cameras. The city mayors are taking on a central role in the efforts to monitor difficult working class neighbourhoods.

The local security contracts open the door to extremely reactionary measures. On June 15, the new mayor of Orleans, Gaullist Serge Grouard, introduced a limited curfew for minors in three problematic city boroughs, banning all young people under 14 years old from going out after 11 o'clock at night, punishing their parents by withdrawing their child benefits or subsidised public housing. He was only able to carry out this special measure, because his Socialist Party predecessor had already introduced a "security contract" in these districts.

From the outset, the restoration of state controls, under the banner of "public security," was in the government programme of Lionel Jospin and the Socialist Party. PS secretary François Hollande acknowledged this at the last party congress: "Civic consciousness can exist only if a respected constitutional state exists". This was supported by the *Gauche socialiste*, the left wing of the party, who vehemently called for the extension of the neighbourhood police and to guarantee the 24-hour presence of specially-trained police officers, since otherwise the poorest layers of society would fall victim to crime.

Since Jospin entered office, the police apparatus has grown by 15 percent, by 2002 the size of the French police force will grow to 145,000 from 125,000 in 1997. In August 2001 in an interview with the TF1 television station, Jospin rebuffed the accusation that he lacked the political will to guarantee security, with the words: "Along with [Interior Minister] Chevènement, have I placed security at the centre of my politics since 1997."

Jean-Pierre Chevènement, of the *Mouvement des Citoyens* (MDC, Citizens Movement), is a convinced representative of the "centralised republican state." However as Interior Minister, together with his

cabinet chief of staff, police chief Bergougnoux, he has developed and introduced the system of additional, decentralised local security contracts. He resigned from the cabinet in summer 2000, in opposition to the granting of any partial autonomy to Corsica, and is now conducting his own election campaign as a presidential candidate. In this context, he never misses an opportunity to publicly criticise Jospin for not having "the courage to carry out what is necessary".

The topic of security has meanwhile come to dominate the entire election campaign. The reactionary and frenzied climate this is producing was demonstrated only last week, as policemen took to the streets each day to protest against the government and call for more personnel, more money and more resources to fight crime. When last Saturday the Green Party presidential candidate, Noël Mamère, wanted to curry favour by participating on a policemen's demonstration in Paris, he was physically ejected under a hail of insults.

While the new security laws grant almost absolute authority to the state, they do not have the slightest thing to do with ensuring the real security of the general population. They neither provide individual workers with more security from unemployment and poverty, nor protect them from deportation and arbitrary state actions.

Not so long ago, praise was being banded about for France's economic growth and the creation of new jobs promised. In its election campaign, the government is trying not to give rise to any panic about a recession, but Economics Minister Laurent Fabius has had to screw back the September estimate for economic growth by a quarter point to 2.25 percent, even here there could be no guarantees.

Since May, unemployment has continually risen and already threatens to break through the symbolic 10 percent barrier. The government introduced some purely cosmetic measures a few days ago: It modified the methods used to record the jobless statistics and now employs the statistical methods of the ILO (International Labour Organization). Accordingly, unemployment in September was about 8.9 percent, but it has done nothing to change the fact that the year-on-year level of unemployment has risen by 2.4 percent.

Since the beginning of the year, France has witnessed an almost permanent series of labour disputes and desperate actions taken by workers whose jobs, standard of living or work safety are threatened. Following the strikes and demonstrations by staff at Danone and private hospital personnel, Moulinex workers hit the headlines a few days ago, when they threatened to set fire to their factory in Cormelles-le-Royal.

The worsening economic situation makes clear that the new security laws are not so much directed against international terrorism, but rather give the state the necessary means to deal with any domestic unrest.



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