

# The Islamic headscarf ban: a French teacher's view

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*The following comment was written by a retired French teacher and regular contributor to the World Socialist Web Site.*

As a teacher who has taught in secondary education in France for many years, I am in agreement with the principles and analysis enunciated in Alex Lefèbvre's article on the new law on the wearing of religious signs, posted on the WWSW on February 18. [See "France: National Assembly bans Muslim headscarves in schools"]

How is it that virtually all teachers' organisations and parties of the left, and many teachers in France, have given support to this repressive law—one, moreover, that comes from a government against which teachers, along with millions of other workers, were in struggle only six months ago, in some of the longest and most bitter struggles in decades? This is the same government that rode roughshod over mass opposition to the destruction of pension rights and the dismantling of the public education service.

It seems that the same *union sacrée* that united behind President Jacques Chirac as a supposed barrier to neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the presidential elections in 2002 has now regrouped behind the president against Muslims in general, and our Muslim girl pupils in particular—to Le Pen's great pleasure. In so doing, these forces have once again given Chirac's credibility a boost, diverting attention from the brutal cuts in unemployment benefits introduced in the new year and the assault on health and sickness benefits planned for after the regional elections in March and the European elections in June.

I must correct the translation of the French *ostensible* as "ostentatious" in the second line of Lefèbvre's article. It should be "conspicuous." Let me explain why this is not a small question.

For months, the commission headed by former government minister Bernard Stasi and various parliamentarians discussed and wrangled over how to define the religious signs that were to be banned in schools. The choice was between the status quo "signes religieux ostentatoires"—ostentatious religious signs or symbols that had an openly proselytising purpose—and religious signs that were "ostensibles" or "visibles"—conspicuous or visible. In the event, "ostensible"—conspicuous—was the alternative selected and voted for in the National Assembly.

This may appear to the uninitiated to be a semantic quibble on the level of medieval scholastic debates. In fact, very real social, political and historical issues are at stake.

Napoleon's Concordat of 1801 recognised the Catholic, Jewish and two Protestant religions. His regime, subsequent monarchies and the Second Empire restored much of the status of the Catholic Church and gave it a dominant role in education. The last three decades of the 19th century up to 1905 witnessed a struggle over the role of the Catholic

Church in a modern capitalist state. At times, the liberal and radical bourgeoisie was in alliance with the growing workers' movement, seeking to drastically reduce the Catholic Church's grip on education. The high point of this struggle was the 1905 law on the separation of the church from the state, which decreed that "The Republic neither recognises, nor staffs, nor subsidises any religion."

This position was abandoned by Marshal Pétain's regime of collaboration with the Nazi occupier, which put the Church firmly back in place. Much of Pétain's rehabilitation of the Church's role in education was left intact after the Liberation. De Gaulle gave considerable ground back to the Church when he returned to power with the Fifth Republic in 1958. The Stasi commission's report points out that "The law of 31 December 1959 fixes the rules for private schools under contract, in the majority Catholic, whose specific character is recognised and protected by the constitution."

Neither the Third, nor the Fourth, nor the present Fifth Republic brought Alsace-Moselle (in eastern France and under German rule in 1905, so the measure separating church and state did not apply there) into line with the Republic. The Concordat gives churches the right to teach their religions—almost exclusively the Catholic religion—in the state schools of the region.

It should not be forgotten that the Catholic Church controls the education of some 18 percent of the French population, a proportion that is rising because of the declining resources allocated to the public education service.

The Stasi commission report specifically rejects any tampering with the privileges of the Catholic Church in this area: "The commission believes that reaffirmation of the secular state, *la laïcité*, does not lead to the questioning of the particular status of Alsace-Moselle, to which the population of these three departments is particularly attached."

The adoption of the term *ostensible*—conspicuous—to replace the current *ostentatoire*—ostentatious—lowers the threshold of what signs are permissible, while still permitting pupils to wear Christian crosses or Stars of David as pendants or broaches. The Muslim headscarf or veil, arguably acceptable under the previous standard, cannot pass muster under the new standard set by the term *ostensible*.

In many schools, in my experience, before the present furore stoked up by the political establishment and the media, Muslim girls wore headscarves without causing any problem. Indeed, in my classes they have usually been amongst the most serious students.

Thus, without actually spelling it out, the Stasi commission and government party UMP deputies, Socialist Party deputies and most Communist Party deputies, with the extra-parliamentary support of the teachers' unions and the "far left" opportunists led by Lutte Ouvrière, backed a measure that discriminates against Muslim girls who wish to

wear a scarf or veil covering their hair. With consummate hypocrisy, they claimed to be treating all religions equally. They even suggested that Muslims could wear pendants or medallions of the Hand of Fatima.

The small Sikh community, whose beliefs require boys and men to wear turbans, suddenly found that its sons were obliged to either abandon their customs or abandon their studies. For many French people, the Sikhs' reaction to the law was the first knowledge they had of the existence of this community.

In a climate of growing resentment from the immigrant community and a certain disarray in political circles at the backlash their measure had provoked, the education minister, Luc Ferry, pointed out that any object could be made into a religious sign. He speculated as to whether beards, if "Islamic," should be banned in schools. He began to elaborate detailed recommendations as to what size of bandana might be acceptable for girls as a substitute for the headscarf. He suggested an invisible hair net for Sikh boys.

The atmosphere of intrusive interference into the private preferences of our pupils started to take on a distinctively medieval, inquisitorial character. President Chirac and Prime Minister Raffarin—trying to calm a situation where thousands of Muslims and some civil rights activists, largely but not exclusively dominated by fundamentalists, were taking to the streets—were obliged to prevent their education minister from participating further in debates on the law.

Most Socialist Party deputies had opted for the banning of "visible" religious signs, which would have meant a total ban on all outward expressions of religious affiliation. This ultra-secular posturing, known as "intégrisme laïc"—"secular fundamentalism"—would give the state and its representatives in the school hierarchy and administration draconian powers. Presented as the true secularism—the outright banning of all religious expression in state schools—it did have the "merit" of affecting all faiths.

The Christian and Jewish officials opposed this formulation. The Socialist Party, in the event, voted with the government.

Some right-wing politicians were also for banning, in addition to religious signs, all displays of political allegiance in schools—such as T-shirts with the effigy of Che Guevara.

The final choice of *ostensible* permitted the continued witch-hunt of Muslim girls, while not upsetting the Jewish or Christian authorities. The Sikh community is left as the innocent bystander caught in the crossfire—a warning that discrimination directed against any section of the population based on ethnic or religious differences or opinions is a fundamental attack on all rights.

Capitalism, while granting concessions to the insistent and growing demand of the working class for access to education since the 19th century, has always used state education as a direct instrument of social and political control. This is most blatant in France because of the highly centralised state and government control known as *jacobinisme*. French state education has been and remains the most exquisite expression of this *jacobinisme*, which is defended under the guise of secularism, *laïcité*.

In the present debate and media frenzy, Lutte Ouvrière (LO) has been the most ardent advocate of state repression against girls wearing the Muslim veil. After some equivocation, LO came out in support of the law. They had previously made it clear that recalcitrant teachers should be made to act, with or without the new law: "There remains, then the possibility of a ruling from the National Education Service that would ban the scarf, even if 'small,' on the premises of schools. All teachers would then have to enforce the ban, and *the regulation*

*should explicitly provide for this obligation to enforce."* (October 2003 statement of Lutte Ouvrière, emphasis added).

LO has been giving uncritical support to the *Ni putes ni soumises* movement of women that campaigns against the oppression of girls and women on the working class estates, where there are many immigrants and where the sense of having been abandoned by all the parties of the left has driven some youth into the arms of conservative Islam. *Ni putes ni soumises* spokesperson, Fadela Amara, was demonstrating on International Women's Day, March 6, with Chirac and Raffarin's secretary of state for housing and justice, Nicole Guedj, as well as Arlette Laguiller, spokesperson for Lutte Ouvrière.

Fadela Amara is quoted as saying "I am very happy to see that women are mobilising, whatever their political affiliations." Her movement fully supports Chirac's law against the Islamic scarf. The feminists and the "far left" LO march arm in arm with the right-wing Raffarin government!

I have taught in schools with a good proportion of first- and second-generation immigrant children most of my working life, and one of my strongest feelings about this law, which will come into effect in September 2004, is that it is not merely an attack on Muslims; it is a means of obliging teachers and administrators to police the pupils. It reduces teachers' ability to approach social, cultural, ethnic and religious differences in a sensitive and creative way. It encourages intolerance and discrimination amongst pupils. Racist or fascist-minded pupils or parents would have a green light to put teachers in the wrong if they showed too much "indulgence." This puts me in mind of the Pétain regime circulars ordering teachers to report on suspected Jews or *Résistants*.

The *Libération* of March 11 reported a strike of teachers in a *college* (junior high school) in the department of Haut-Rhin against a pupil wearing the headscarf. It confirms my worst fears.

"Yesterday, at 8 o'clock, she appeared wearing a headscarf. She came out a few minutes later along with 400 other pupils." Most of the teachers had gone on strike. "Gathered at the entrance of their school, most of the pupils support the action of their teachers." One took out of his bag a placard: "Are you taking your scarf off? Yes, or shit!"

A teacher is quoted: "The compromise between the family and our superiors was reached without any consultation at all. The erroneous term 'bandana' tricked everybody. We were unable to avoid the confusion and pressing questions of the pupils faced with this scarf. Now, some pupils think they can come to class with all sorts of headwear."

Such developments, diverting attention from the government's elimination of thousands of teaching posts and the starving of education and research of funds, as well as the concerted assault on social and democratic rights, can only aid the most reactionary forces.

As Alex Lefèbvre's article states: "Religious prejudices will be overcome through the political development and education of the working class in the struggle for democratic rights and socialism, not through state decrees imposed from above by governments that serve the interests of an entrenched social elite."



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