

France: Gaullist officials stoke up racism to justify state of emergency

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Ministers and deputies of the ruling Gaullist party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), have issued statements calculated to whip up anti-immigrant and racist sentiment in order to justify the government's unprecedented imposition of a three-month state of emergency.

The chairman of the UMP group in the National Assembly, Bernard Accoyer, stated on Radio RTL last Wednesday that polygamy among African immigrant families was "certainly one of the causes" of three weeks of violent anti-police protests by immigrant youth in ghetto suburbs on the outskirts of Paris and many other French cities.

Accoyer added that the authorities had shown themselves to be "strangely lax" on the question. He also blamed the Plural Left government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) for its policies on reuniting immigrant families. Asked whether welfare payments should be withheld from the families of convicted rioters, he said, "It would be justified in some cases... but it should not be generalised."

The youth violence had already substantially subsided by the time the National Assembly voted November 15 to extend by three months a state of emergency that had been decreed for 12 days by the cabinet and was due to run until November 21.

The 1955 law enabling the government to proclaim a state of emergency stipulates that an extension can be decided only by the National Assembly. It permits a sweeping expansion of police powers and curtailment of civil liberties.

The scapegoating of a small section of African immigrant families is an attempt to justify the massive assault on democratic rights which the state of emergency represents and channel popular opposition to the government's right-wing social policies in a reactionary direction.

Nicolas Sarkozy, minister of the interior and chairman of the UMP, continued his provocative law-and-order and anti-immigrant rhetoric, telling *Express* magazine: "Let's tell things as they are: the polygamy and acculturation of some families make it more difficult to integrate a young French person from black Africa than a young French person from elsewhere." He vowed to prevent the ghetto housing estates from being taken over by "the men with beards."

Gerard Larcher, junior minister for youth employment, told foreign journalists that polygamy was "one possible cause." He added that polygamy sometimes caused anti-social behaviour and concluded, "As some of society manifests this anti-social behaviour, it is no surprise that some of them have difficulty finding work."

The obvious aim of this sort of racist filth is to blame the immigrant population for the pervasive and entrenched conditions of mass unemployment, poverty, discrimination and police abuse that are the real causes of the eruption of protests that shook France this past month. Such statements have been combined with calls for measures to further restrict the right of immigrants to unite with their families in France.

The racist statements by UMP officials were immediately endorsed by Jean-Marie Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front.

They were sparked off by remarks from H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse, "perpetual secretary" of the Acad emie Fran aise. This institution has served as the official arbiter of the language and literature of France since the age of Louis XIV.

Encausse sits on commissions of the European Union and many French government bodies. *Lib eration* quoted her explaining to the Russian press the causes of the disturbances in the French suburbs: "These people come directly from their African villages... Why are the African children in the street and not at school? Why can't their

parents buy a flat? The reason is obvious: many of these Africans are polygamous. In one flat there are three or four wives and 25 children. They are so crammed that they're no longer apartments, but God knows what! You can understand why these children are running about in the street."

This kind of language in public statements is unprecedented in France since the period of the Nazi occupation and the collaborationist régime of Marshal Philippe Pétain (1940-1944), and is profoundly shocking and offensive to immigrants, anti-racists and defenders of democratic rights. The social crisis in France and fears of a revolt from below are bringing to the surface the deep, racist phobias of the intellectual and political elites of this old colonial power.

Sarkozy, the chief rival within the UMP to the old-line Gaullist leadership around President Jacques Chirac, is only too pleased to encourage such moods and appeal to the most backward layers of French society. He is seeking to build a right-wing movement combining racism and xenophobia with neo-liberal "free market" policies aimed at destroying the welfare state.

On Saturday Sarkozy, in his role as leader of the UMP, addressed the monthly gathering of new members. He reiterated the law-and-order, anti-immigrant populism which he is employing to draw new recruits into the UMP, once again using the word "scum" to describe the youth on the impoverished housing estates. He asserted, "The primary cause of unemployment, of despair, of violence in the suburbs is not discrimination, nor is it failure at school. The primary cause of despair in these neighbourhoods is drug peddling, gang rule, the dictatorship of fear and the disengagement of the Republic."

He was not, of course, referring to the government's withdrawal of funds for social services from the neighbourhoods, but instead promoting his policy of intensifying police repression. Sarkozy claimed that the wave of youth riots and anti-police violence had been provoked by delinquents opposing his actions to "dismantle the gangs."

He blamed the French welfare state and protective legislation for France's social ills: "We must profoundly change our country, break with a political, social, economic system which, over the past 30 years, has produced, above all, unemployment, debt and immobility."

The followers of Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin within the UMP have lined up with Sarkozy

on the build-up of police repression and other anti-democratic measures, but they are at odds with Sarkozy over his provocative rhetoric and tactics. They are more sensitive to the explosive social and political implications of Sarkozy's brand of demagoguery and wish, while taking the necessary measures to defend and strengthen the bourgeois state against working class opposition to their policies, to maintain a semblance of social consensus.

Referring to the polygamy polemic, Villepin said, "We must avoid generalisations... we must keep calm and not lose our heads... There is not just one cause... there are many reasons... the crisis of moral values... the social dimension." The latter was a euphemism for the 40 percent unemployment in the immigrant neighbourhoods and conditions of grinding poverty.

Supporting him, Michèle Alliot-Marie, minister of defence, said "the youth feel too often that they are all treated as delinquents." She suggested that their violence was "a form of suicidal despair... I invite all politicians and commentators not to limit themselves to a single explanation of this crisis and not to put everyone in the same basket."

There is a strong element of hypocrisy in such statements from the Chirac wing of the Gaullists. Chirac has not been averse to playing the race card. Many French people remember well his notorious speech on June 19, 1991 in Orléans, when he declared, "Our problem is not foreigners, but there's an overdose... the Muslims and the Blacks... the French worker who toils, along with his wife, earns about 15,000 francs, and sees across the next door landing of his council flat, all packed together, a father with three or four wives, and a score of children, who are receiving 50,000 francs in welfare benefits, naturally without working... If you add the noise and the smell, well, the French worker goes mad. It's not racist to say this."

As Villepin told *Le Figaro* on November 19: "Behind the battle of words is hidden quite a degree of agreement."



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