

France: New law requires teachers to present a “positive” account of French colonialism

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19 December 2005

On November 29 the French National Assembly confirmed its support for a law that glorifies French colonial conquest and the French empire and makes it obligatory for teachers to give a favourable gloss to the history of this brutal past.

The move is part of an ideological shift to the right being carried out by the ruling Gaullist party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), spearheaded by the party’s chairman and minister of the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, President Jacques Chirac’s rival on the right of the party. It is aimed at consolidating support from the most reactionary sections of French society: in particular the officer corps, steeped in the memory of their colonial exploits and notions of national honour, who believe that France should never have relinquished her empire, and the embittered *pieds noirs* white settlers, a million of whom were forced to leave Algeria in 1962 when then President Charles De Gaulle ceded Algeria to the nationalists. The *pieds noirs* form part of the electoral and political base of the right and the far right, especially in the southeast.

When the French army left Algeria in 1962 it abandoned many of the *Harkis*, Algerians serving in the colonial forces and administration, to the mercy of the victorious FLN (National Liberation Front), who slaughtered them by the thousands, a fate of which the French were fully aware. Those *Harkis* who did manage to escape to France were left in ghettos and are fighting to this day for pension rights and other benefits. The new law partially addresses this situation but also recognises the rights of the OAS (Secret Army Organisation). The OAS wanted to organise a putsch against De Gaulle in France and to set up a military dictatorship in opposition to the 1962 Evian agreement ending colonial rule in Algeria.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the initiatives for the development of a chauvinist ideology originate only from the extreme right and the Sarkozy wing of the UMP.

The education reform of François Fillon earlier this year made compulsory the learning by heart of the words of the national anthem, “The Marseillaise,” in primary schools. Deputy Michel Diefenbacher, commissioned by Chirac’s former prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, presented a report in February 2003, “aiming to complete the actions of national solidarity to the *rapatriés* [*pieds noirs*]” and to “publicise the collective achievements of France overseas.”

In March 2003, the present minister of foreign affairs, Philippe Douste-Blazy, put forward the proposition: “The positive achievements that the whole of our citizens experienced in Algeria during the period of the French presence is publicly recognised.”

The present minister of defence, Michèle Alliot-Marie, a Chirac supporter, stated in March 2003: “The recognition of the positive achievements of our compatriots in these territories is a duty for the

French state.”

Not only do Sarkozy, President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin hope to win voters from the neo-fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen. They also seek to create the ideological climate and to gather the forces needed to break the resistance of workers and youth to the destruction of living standards and democratic rights required by French big business to compete in the globalised world economy.

The paragraph in article 4 of the law, which is provoking a broad movement of opposition, states: “The school syllabuses recognise in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa, and devotes to the history and the sacrifice of the soldiers of the French Army originating from these territories the eminent place which is due to them.” The “soldiers of the French Army” referred to here are the *Harkis* who participated alongside the forces of French imperialism in the two world wars and particularly the Algerian war (1954-1962).

Libération of March 15, 2005 describes how UMP deputy Christian Vanneste, a member of the ultra-right *Club de l’Horloge*, along with National Front academics and intellectuals, moved the above quoted article, as an amendment, in the afternoon session of the National Assembly on June 11, 2004, claiming that it “would tend to make the younger generations more aware of the positive side of the French presence in Africa and Asia.”

The newspaper points out, “No member of the Socialist or Communist opposition came forward. The amendments were voted for. They were not questioned, either in the Senate or at the second reading in the Assembly. The law was promulgated.”

It was university and secondary school history teachers, researchers and primary school teachers who took the lead in opposing the law after it had been approved by all parties, to be circulated on February 23, 2005. Their movement was reinforced by the response of the Algerian government to the provisions of the law on June 6 and its questioning of the planned signing of a treaty of friendship between France and Algeria if the law was not repealed.

The hostility to the law is such in the French overseas territories that Sarkozy was forced to cancel a planned visit to the former Caribbean island slave colonies Guadeloupe and Martinique. Consequently, some ministers and members of the ruling Gaullist UMP, especially those representing these territories, have been obliged to speak out against article 4. President Jacques Chirac has attempted to defuse the situation by stating that “it is not for the law to write history,” setting up a “multi-party mission to assess the action of parliament in commemoration (*mémoire*) and history”—to report in three months time. Meanwhile, however, the legislation still has the force of law.

Those now mobilising against article 4 of the “Law of 23 January 2005 bearing the Gratitude of the Nation and National Contribution in favour of Repatriated French People” include all the left parties (Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens, Left Republican Party) and the Lutte Ouvrière—LO (Workers Fight) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—RCL (Revolutionary Communist League). At the initiative of Dominique Strauss Khan, former Socialist Party (SP) minister of the economy, finance and industry in the Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), a press conference on December 15 brought together leaders of all these political organisations in support of a petition calling for the repeal of article 4.

The event, which was designed to restore to the Socialist Party some semblance of left credentials as a defender of civil liberties, had the full support of the leaders of the “far-left” parties: Arlette Laguiller of LO and Alain Krivine of the LCR participated alongside François Hollande, the SP leader.

The LCR’s leaflet of the week, dated December 12, calls only for the repeal of article 4 as does the December 16 editorial of the weekly *Rouge*, despite its observation that “if article 4 is scandalous, the law itself is unacceptable.”

Lutte Ouvrière calls for the repeal of the entire law and publishes material on the role of the Socialist Party in supporting French imperialism’s colonial wars and oppression. This did not prevent Arlette Laguiller politely participating in Strauss-Khan and Hollande’s press conference, anxious to occupy her place covering the left flank of France’s political establishment.

The record of the Socialist Party in relationship to the law is particularly embarrassing for its leaders. Hollande claimed that the SP voted for it in 2004 “by negligence,” in sessions where only a handful of deputies were present. The Communist Party, which has a parliamentary group and which was part of Jospin’s Plural Left coalition, is in no better position.

The parliamentary motion for the repeal of article 4, submitted by the Socialist Party, was voted down by the UMP on November 29, the same day that Sarkozy’s latest anti-terror law was passed unopposed by the Socialist Party, which abstained. The Socialist Party, with the enthusiastic support of the media, used its pose of defending the rights of historians and teachers to treat French colonialism without state interference to divert attention from the assault on civil liberties represented by both the 1955 law relating to the imposition of the ongoing state of emergency and the anti-terror law. The combination of these two laws gives the state the right, amongst other powers, of blanket surveillance of citizens by closed-circuit cameras and access to the records of phone and Internet providers as well as full control of the media.

The sham of the press conference and the campaign against article 4 is apparent when the rest of the law—which the left is prepared to accept—is examined. The first article proclaims: “The Nation expresses its gratitude to the women and men who participated in the achievements of France in the former French departments of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and in Indochina as well as in the other territories formerly under French sovereignty.” While paying tribute to those who sacrificed themselves for the empire, there is none for the victims of colonialism or those, from France and the colonies, who fought against its depredations and to free them from its yoke.

The defenders of the law fail to mention French imperialism’s participation in the slave trade from the sixteenth century and the continuation of slavery in its colonies until abolition in 1848. They point to the benefits of civilisation brought to the peoples of the

empire—education and medical science—but omit the fact that these were only available to a tiny proportion of the colonised population. They talk of the introduction of roads and railways, but not of the forced labour destructive of the lives of thousands of workers that built them, or of the purpose of these means of transport: to better exploit the conquered territories. The brutality of the conquest, the Native Code, which ensured total domination by the coloniser, the destruction of the native economy and agriculture, resulting in famine, go unmentioned by the supporters of the law. Unmentioned too is the reduction of Algeria’s population by 700,000 between 1830 and 1870 and that of the Ivory Coast by a million in the colonial period and the theft of their land. In 1954, 25 percent of Algerian land was the property of 2 percent of the settler population.

The narrowing of the opposition to the law to article 4 serves to limit the discussion to the freedom of historians and teachers to work. It prevents the development of a real understanding of the history of French colonialism, which is essential to the development of a contemporary political movement of the working class.

The reticence of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party to engage in a controversy about the role of French imperialism in the colonies does not merely stem from their immediate priority, the nationalist defence of the institutions of the state and the interests of national capitalism, but also from their wish to hide their past complicity in the crimes of French colonialism.

On May 8, 1945, during the parade in the Algerian town of Sétif celebrating the victory over the Nazis, Algerian nationalists brandished their flag. The repression of this act led to an uprising which was followed by massacres of many thousands of Algerians perpetrated by local white settler militias and the army. The government, in which the Socialists and the Communists had ministers, sent 40,000 troops to crush all resistance. The Communist minister of aviation, the Resistance hero Charles Tillon, provided the airplanes. In 1947, under the presidency of the Socialist Vincent Auriol, the government parties again supported the bloody suppression of the Madagascar insurrection against colonial rule.

In 1955, François Mitterrand, later to become the Socialist president of France, then minister of the interior, asserted in the face of the national liberation movement: “Algeria is France ... The only negotiation is war.” In 1956 the Socialist and Communist deputies voted the Socialist leader Guy Mollet full powers, which he used to send a massive military force and gave the notorious torture generals Massu, Bigeard and Aussaresses carte blanche to crush the rebellion. Mitterrand, as justice minister, endorsed their powers. The generals’ methods are evoked in Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *The Battle of Algiers*. (See “A timeless portrait of the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria”)

In 1987, President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Chirac appointed General Maurice Schmitt, a practitioner of torture in the Algerian war and unrepentant defender of its use, commander in chief of France’s armed forces.



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