

France: airport workers fired in anti-Muslim campaign

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Since the end of the summer break, at least 70 workers at the Paris Roissy airport have lost their security badges and thus their jobs because they are Muslims. This figure is reported by the CFDT trade union (French Democratic Federation of Labour), which, with other unions, has lodged a complaint with the prosecutor's office against discrimination. Some of the victimised workers are elected union representatives. The CFDT is close to the Socialist Party.

French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy justified the removal by the *sous-préfet* (deputy police chief) of the airport area, Jacques Lebrot, of security clearances for the 43 baggage handlers, all of whom are Muslims, in a speech delivered at the Sorbonne university on October 21. He said, "I can't accept that people who have a radical outlook should work in an airport runway area. I prefer the risk of litigation because we have been too strict than having a tragedy on our hands because we have not been strict enough."

He added that it was "his duty to make sure that they had neither close nor distant links with radical organisations.... Perhaps we made some mistakes...let them claim their rights in the courts." This attitude indicates the intention of the French state to carry out victimisations at will in the name of the "war on terrorism."

The arbitrary nature of the revocation of the workers' security badges was underlined November 7 in regard to emergency rulings requested by eight Roissy workers being examined by a magistrate at the Bobigny tribunal. The lawyer acting for Sarkozy and the *préfet*, Georges Holleaux, announced that for two of the workers, "it has been decided to cancel the revocation of their badge."

The judge has also to give a ruling on the request by seven workers for access to their police files and also on the issue of "the violation of the principle of the presumption of innocence."

Mr. Moutet, the lawyer representing some of the workers, pointed out that no legal action was being taken against the workers whose passes had been revoked.

Sarkozy claims he has "precise elements" to support his claims of "terrorist ties," but provides no proof. As part of his "war on terror," those accused are guilty until proven innocent. His local police chief responsible for airport security, Jacques Lebrot, defended the witch-hunt against Muslims, citing the "terrorist risk." The letter sent to the victims is Kafkaesque: "Considering that the observations of Mr. X (the worker's name) have not been of a nature to furnish proof of a behaviour *not liable* to harm airport security" (emphasis added), this was enough for the worker to be fired. The victim is required to prove a negative.

Attorney Moutet, made clear that police interrogations had centred on the men's religious beliefs: "Are you a Muslim?"—"Do you regularly practice your religion?"—"Do you know this or that Imam?"—"Do you frequent this/that Mosque?"—"Why do you wear a beard?" Other questions focussed on foreign trips, especially to Pakistan. Jacques Lebrot stated, "For someone who spends several vacations in Pakistan, that poses questions for us."

Since January 2002, following the September 11 attacks in the US, airport security has been tightened. Pass badges for reserved areas are delivered by the *préfet*, who rejects people whose "morality and behaviour do not present the necessary guarantees in regard to public safety." Screening does not just take into account the possible criminal record of a worker, but is also based on police files, the accuracy of which have never been proved.

From February 2002, a vast campaign of checking the security clearances of airport workers (baggage handlers, security staff) was carried out, leading to hundreds of sackings because badges were withdrawn.

A CGT (General Confederation of Labour) official commented, "After years of working at the airport, these people were the subject of enquiries. Many had grown up in the council estates, and had perhaps done a few foolish, more or less serious things, but it was this very job which had enabled them to break with this past and achieve stability." She said that the CGT had discovered that the police files contained details of charges that had been

disproved and even arrests where no charges had been made.

Didier Frassin, representing the local CGT branch, told the press that for the 80,000 workers at the airport—the biggest source of employment in the Paris region—“the security pass can be withdrawn at any moment; this way the badges were transformed into a means of control.” He said this was like a “sword of Damocles over their heads.” The slightest brush with the police, even outside the airport, can mean the loss of the badge. “After a strike and occupation of the airplane parking area, the *préfet* punished the trade union representatives with a week’s withdrawal of clearance, without wages.... It’s a kind of disciplinary right in the hands of the *préfet*,” he said.

In a statement, the SUD trade union confederation’s airport workers’ section commented, “The ‘terrorist threat’ is being used to stigmatise and discriminate, in an unacceptable way, against workers of North African origins, whether they practice a religion or not, by refusing them access to the reserved zone of the airport.”

Several workers have turned to the MRAP (Movement against Racism and for Friendship between the Peoples), which reported that since August 2006, nearly 100 people had been affected, and that after carefully studying the *préfet*’s considerations and the details of the case, “the MRAP fears that arbitrary and discriminatory factors had prevailed in this decision.”

The publication in April 2006 of the book *The Mosques of Roissy* by Philippe de Villiers set the tone for the French state’s racist agenda. De Villiers leads the extreme right-wing Mouvement pour la France (MPF) party, which competes with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s neo-fascist Front National and Sarkozy’s ruling UMP (Union for a People’s Movement) to capture the anti-immigrant vote. In his book, de Villiers claimed that Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin “had received a new report that there was a strong exposure of the baggage zone to terrorist risks connected to this milieu, free to be active around airplanes.”

In a TV interview on July 16, de Villiers claimed that “Islam is the breeding ground for terrorism.” The book’s title drew attention to the claim of the existence of dozens of illegal mosques at Roissy airport, which were in fact no more than prayer mats located here and there between changing lockers. De Villiers, a Catholic aristocrat, has demanded that the Christian faith be inscribed in the European constitution and declared that “Islam is not compatible with the [French] Republic.”

Philippe de Villiers went further in his attacks on Muslims in an interview with *Le Figaro* on November 2, declaring the need to “ban the Muslim veil in all public places.” This outburst seeks to extend the existing law banning the veil in schools, adopted by Chirac’s government in 2004. This

received the support of the Socialist Party and “left” radicals like Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) and encouraged the right to scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis in the urban areas.

The Socialist Party’s web site makes no mention of the blatant injustices being carried out at Roissy and no leading member has spoken out on the issue, which affects the job opportunities of workers in the most poverty-stricken, largely immigrant Seine-Saint-Denis area in north Paris.

The unions CGT and CFDT have referred the case to the courts and promised some “wider action” after a meeting of all Roissy airport unions on November 7. The unions are dragging out the court actions and putting off any strike movement and confrontation with the government. The power of Roissy’s 80,000 workers and those of the Paris region should be mobilised against these attempts to victimise and intimidate, not only immigrant workers, but broad sections of the working class. The trade unions have a long record of collaborating with the government to prevent a mass political opposition to the government’s attacks on democratic and social rights and cannot be relied upon to carry through such a struggle.

The government and the UMP are increasingly playing the racist card in the run-up to next April’s presidential election, lumping together the “war on terror,” the “Islamic menace” and immigration as constituting a threat to “French values.”

Secularism, the recognition of the right of citizens to practice their religious beliefs, whereby the state exercises no religious power and the churches no political power, has been distorted by the French political establishment, left and right, which has made a nationalistic and racist appeal to justify state interference against religious minorities, in particular Muslims.



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