

France: Sarkozy's national identity campaign boosts the National Front

Antoine Lerougetel
21 December 2009

French president Nicolas Sarkozy, in a December 9 opinion piece in *Le Monde*, gave vent to an extreme nationalist and barely concealed Islamophobic appeal to the most reactionary forces within French society.

Its purpose is to win a social base for the imposition of authoritarian rule in order to make the working class pay for the economic crisis and the vast state debts incurred in bailing out the banks. It is also designed to create the ideological climate to justify France's imperialist foreign policy, involving the unpopular military intervention in Afghanistan in the scramble for the world's strategic resources, mainly oil and gas, by competing imperialist powers

The article vigorously defends the recent Swiss referendum vote for a law making the building of mosque minarets illegal. Sarkozy asserts that those attacking the Swiss referendum vote were attacking "the Swiss people" and furthermore were showing a general "scorn for the people" and "a visceral mistrust for everything coming from the people." He denies that the vote had any effect on "religious freedom and freedom of conscience."

Sarkozy's public endorsement of the Swiss referendum vote places him at the head of a sharp move to the right in European politics. Indeed, Sarkozy positions himself to the right of the ruling political parties in Switzerland, which had opposed a vote for the ban, if only for fear of possible damage to the country's banking, trade and tourist interests.

The law is being challenged by Muslim groups in the European Court of Human Rights as being incompatible with the European Convention of Human Rights. They point out that it is discriminatory because it exclusively directed at the Muslim religion.

Sarkozy's article is part of the national-identity campaign, spearheaded by his increasingly fanatical minister of immigration and national identity, Eric Besson, the former Socialist Party spokesman on economic affairs. It is an escalation of the state racism and Islamophobia expressed in the 2004 law banning the wearing of Muslim headscarfs by girls in schools and the parliamentary mission preparing legislation for the banning of the burqa in public. The burqa mission is led by the Communist Party deputy André Gerin and made up of representatives of all parliamentary parties, including the

Socialist Party and the Greens.

Besson ordered the forced repatriation of nine Afghans, whose safety is in severe doubt, to Kabul on Wednesday, on a plane jointly chartered with the British government, against the express wishes of the Afghan government.

Most notable about Sarkozy's right-wing populism is the complete non-recognition of class divisions within "the people" and his exclusive use of religion to define social categories: "Christian, Jew or Muslim, man of faith, whatever his faith, whatever his beliefs...."

Asserting the fundamentally "Christian civilisation" of France and the "values of the Republic," Sarkozy warns newcomers and particularly Muslims that any challenge by them to these "values...would condemn to failure the so-necessary establishment of a French Islam."

Addressing "my Muslim compatriots," he tells any would-be immigrant that he or she should "avoid any ostentation or provocation and, conscious of the luck he has to live in a land of liberty, must practice his religions with humble discretion" and integrate "smoothly into our social and civic pact."

Smearing immigrants as anti-social, Sarkozy demands complete subservience to the bourgeois state, claiming, "National identity is the antidote to tribalism and communalism."

Media and political commentators are wide of the mark when they assume that the national identity campaign is just a stunt to retain the support of the far-right electorate of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (FN) in the regional elections set for March 2010. On the contrary, Sarkozy recognises that the end of the political mechanism for maintaining capitalist rule in France, since the Liberation in 1944, by alternating "left" governments and rule by the Gaullists and other conservative parties, on the basis of the political subjugation of the working class by the unions. The crucial turning point was 2002, when the Socialist Party candidate in the presidential elections, Lionel Jospin, was pushed into third place and eliminated from the run-off with the Gaullist Jacques Chirac.

Since taking office in May 2007, Sarkozy had relied on the trade unions, by well-spaced-out one-day strikes to let off steam and the isolation of workers in struggle, to enable him to

carry out a series of attacks on working conditions, social rights (particularly pensions) and the social services, notably health and education.

It is now a truism that crucial to Sarkozy's successes has been the collaboration with Bernard Thibault, the leader of France's main union the National Confederation of Labour (CGT—close to the Communist Party—PCF)

The November 28 edition of the widely read news weekly *Marianne* reported: "In this time of crisis, the head of state and the general secretary of the main trade union in France have been living a strange idyll." It quotes a presidential adviser: "It's been a miraculous autumn, not a boss kidnapped, not a student in the streets, not a demonstration!... Sarkozy and Thibault have channelled discontent and doused the fires together, and so we have got through a terrifying period in calm."

Sarkozy and his advisors know that the trade unions will not be able to continue to hold back the resistance of the working class. Mainly bureaucratic structures, they are largely maintained and financed by the state and the bosses. They have a total membership of less than 8% of the workforce, the lowest of the 30 industrialised countries of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Already, some 800,000 unemployed workers are due to run out of benefits in 2010 and unemployment rates are expected to soar beyond the 10% mark in the new year. The cuts in spending required to pay back the vast debts incurred by the government to bail out the banks and industry will dwarf those imposed in the two and a half years of Sarkozy's five-year mandate.

In the deepening crisis, the bourgeoisie has boosted Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party as a coalition partner of the PS/PCF. But it must also build the most reactionary forces to act as a battering ram against the class struggles that are inevitable as it places the burden of the economic crisis on the workers and youth.

There are signs that Sarkozy's strident embrace of large parts of the National Front's programme and ideology, rather than attracting the far-right vote, is boosting the neo-fascists. Le Pen's daughter and likely successor, Marine Le Pen, is shown on television working the markets with leaflets headed "National Identity." The opinion polls show 10% voting for the FN in the regional elections, which could be very damaging for the prospects of the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). Approval ratings for Sarkozy are now dipping below 40%.

Workers' rejection of the corrupt pro-capitalist policies of the left bourgeois parties as well as of the UMP led to a near victory of the NF in the Henin-Beaumont by-election this year. A coalition of parties from the New Anti-capitalist Party, the SP, the PCF, the Greens and the UMP supported the independent "left" list, which just scraped home ahead of the FN list.

Nadine Morano, the secretary of state for the family caused a

furor when she declared that she "expected [of] a young Muslim...that he should love France when he lives in this country...that he should get a job...not speak *verlan* [slang]...and not wear his cap the wrong way round."

Morano's remarks will be seen by French youth of all origins as a slur and, in a country where nearly a quarter of the population have at least one grandparent who is an immigrant, the racist card is one that can backfire on those who play it. Resentment at such rhetoric goes far beyond the urban ghettos.

More crudely, *Médiapart* reports that at the national identity meeting organised December 1 by the *préfet* of La Meuse, the UMP mayor of Gussainville, André Valentin, declared: "We are going to get swamped.... There are already ten million of them...ten million who we pay to do sweet nothing."

When the La Meuse UMP deputy Bertrand Pancher demanded the suspension from the party of Valentin, Besson defended him, saying it was just "an unfortunate expression."

Increasingly, sections of the political elite are worried that the national identity campaign launched by Sarkozy and Besson is getting out of control. AFP quotes the UMP deputy Jean-Pierre Grand, a supporter of Sarkozy's rival, Dominique de Villepin, describing the national identity campaign as "a marvellous boost for the National Front. I regret it profoundly."

Former UMP prime ministers de Villepin, Jean-Pierre Raffarin and Alain Juppé have publicly expressed their objections to Sarkozy's article and the national identity campaign.

The Socialist Party opposition to Sarkozy's national identity campaign has been based on defence of national cohesion, that is, hostility to any struggle of the working class across national and ethnic boundaries.

Their support, and that of their Plural Left allies, for the banning of the Muslim headscarf in schools and the anti-burqa mission, as well as restrictive immigration policies, and their support for French imperialism's military adventures in Afghanistan and elsewhere are an integral part of Sarkozy's ability to turn to open racism. So too is the collaboration of the trade unions, notably the CGT's support for national industry to the detriment of foreign workers.

Workers and youth must fight all expressions of nationalism in defence of their independent class interests for a socialist solution to the crisis in France, Europe and internationally.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact