France: Thousands protest against Israeli assault of Gaza-bound flotilla

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Revulsion felt worldwide against the May 31 murder by Israeli armed forces of nine activists on a humanitarian flotilla of boats bringing supplies to the besieged Palestinians of Gaza has been particularly strong in France. It is home to Europe's largest Muslim community—between five and six million citizens, predominantly of Arab origin.

Ten of the 700 peaceful activists that were on the flotilla are French nationals.

Some 70,000 people marched in protest through France's major cities last Saturday. More demonstrations followed on Sunday, in continuation of daily protests which have taken place since news of the Israeli atrocity broke.

The main imperialist powers are dismayed at the potential disruption of the geopolitical equilibrium between the US and the powers of the European Union, the Middle East and Central Asia. Turkey's Islamic government's sponsorship of the NGO-organised relief convoy raises the possibility of a diplomatic or even military standoff between the two countries.

Hence, French president Nicolas Sarkozy's immediate reaction to the Israeli assault on the aid flotilla was to condemn "the disproportionate use of force" and to call for the resumption of peace talks between Israel and Palestine.

Less diplomatic was the comment of Elysée spokesman Frédéric Lefebvre, which expressed the hatred of French imperialism for the struggles of the Arab masses, fed by memories of the Algerian war of independence from France, and hostility to workers and youth of France's urban ghettos. Lefebvre condemned the "provocations" of "those who claim to be friends of the Palestinians."

Neither of them, however, mentioned Israel's military assaults or its continuing 4-year blockade against the 1.5 million inhabitants of Gaza, which has deprived much of the population of basic necessities.

Parti socialiste (PS) spokesman Benoît Hamon issued a statement calling on the United States to join in "a solemn condemnation of the operation, deploring the use of force by Israel." He called for "an international response...backed by the US so as to change the positions of the Israeli government." Both the ruling conservative UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*) and the opposition PS have a long history of supporting Israel.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, speaking to the press on Sunday after a meeting with his British counterpart William Hague, proposed that "the European Union...the European countries should control this passage very strictly." He was careful to demonstrate that he had no objection to the virtually defenceless situation of the people of Gaza, subject to ceaseless bombing raids by the Israeli army, saying, "I understand the necessity for controlling arms."

Both foreign ministers called on Israel to accept an international inquiry into the Israeli raid on the humanitarian convoy.

Despite the genuine anger and feelings of solidarity with the Palestinian people expressed by the protesters in France, the politics of the protests' organisers do not differ in any significant respect from those expressed above by the bourgeois parties of France and Britain.

Sunday's demonstration in Paris was largely organised by the petty-bourgeois *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* of Olivier Besancenot. The appeal for support for Sunday's demonstration in Paris posted on the NPA site June 2, titled "Communiqué of the National Collective for a just and lasting Peace between

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Palestinians and Israelis," appeals to the EU to impose sanctions on Israel.

In line with Hague and Kouchner, the collective calls for "the transportation of all humanitarian cargos to Gaza to take place under international control."

Their appeals to the "international community"—that is, principally to imperialist governments friendly to Israel—overlook the essential role of the working class in Palestine, Israel, and internationally in opposing the policies of Israel and the imperialist powers. As the Israeli-Turkish standoff continues, with Israel benefiting from the support of the major powers, these organizations have no perspective for securing an end to the Israeli-Turkish standoff favorable to the Palestinians.

The appeal was endorsed by a large number of nationalist, Islamic and petty-bourgeois peace organisations and by the Stalinist *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) and the Left Party (*Parti de Gauche*, PG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

The attempts by such parties to pose as defenders of Muslim rights were particularly hypocritical, given their role in stirring up anti-Muslim prejudice and law-and-orderism through a ban on the burqa in France. The PCF and the PG both participated fully in the parliamentary commission that prepared a draft law totally banning the wearing of the burqa in France. This was an integral part of the government's Islamophobic national identity campaign, designed to divide the working class despite the draconian austerity plans it is imposing and its military intervention alongside US imperialism in Afghanistan.

WSWS reporters covered the Paris demonstration. NPA and *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO, Workers Struggle) members attended, and the march was headed by their leaders Olivier Besancenot and Nathalie Arthaud, alongside Pierre Laurent of the PCF and Mélenchon.

Mélenchon withdrew, complaining that religious movements had placed contingents on the section of the march reserved for French political parties. Official banners called for a boycott of Israel.

Youth from the working class council estates and immigrants from the former French colonies carried national flags as well as the Palestinian flags and colours. Homemade placards read "Free Gaza", "No to barbarism and piracy", "Zionists, fascists, Israel is the terrorist", "Withdraw the blockade from Gaza", "Palestine will live and win."

WSWS supporters distributed leaflets of the article "Israel's massacre at sea" and spoke to demonstrators.

Sylvain said, "It's not in the interests of the government to support the Palestinians. Big business's interests are on the side of the Israelis. It's a strategic power, an aircraft carrier for America."

He continued, "they go on about the burqa and national identity so we won't talk about what is really happening, the antisocial laws, the social gains which are being demolished. It's divide and rule. The PS is incapable of defending the people and the workers. Either you defend the workers or you defend the monopolies; you can't do both."

Yassim, a math student, said: "French and American imperialism will always agree with the Israelis. If they're friends, it's just for the oil. The day the oil runs out, they'll cease to be friends. This can be fought, but it'll need a lot of people, people who express their revolt."

Guillaume, doing audiovisual studies, said: "Sarkozy is tied to the Israeli lobby in France, so we can't expect a response from him. But we hope at least for a response from the people. Personally I expect nothing from him or DSK [Dominique Strauss Kahn, present managing director of the International Monetary Fund and front runner for the PS candidate in the 2012 presidential elections]."

He added, "The Israelis and French Jews must not be demonised. I'm in complete agreement with the Israelis who are fighting, the 24-hour strike of the Israeli Arabs who are fighting against apartheid."

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