

French government's law-and-order measures threaten democratic rule

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The raft of law-and-order measures announced in recent weeks in France highlights the far-right turn by the political establishment. Facing massive popular hostility to its policies, the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has escalated the political establishment's promotion of racism in a bid to divide the working class while gutting democratic rights and the rule of law.

In the aftermath of riots in Grenoble and Saint-Aignan, provoked by the killing of two men by the police, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced repressive measures against Roma (the nomadic gypsy minority) and immigrants, stigmatizing them as criminal. Among other measures, he announced the dismantling of 300 Roma encampments within three months and the mass deportation of the Roma community—mainly to Romania. (See: “French police use live ammunition against riots over police killings”)

In an official speech in Grenoble on July 30, Sarkozy said, “It should be possible to remove the nationality of anyone of foreign origin who has voluntarily threatened the life of a policeman, or any other person who represents public authority”. He added, “We will re-evaluate what offenses could be punished by withdrawing French citizenship”.

Over the last two weeks, some 50 encampments have been dismantled by CRS riot police, their inhabitants swept up in a massive police dragnet. The “evacuated” Roma face deportation. According to French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux, 700 Roma will be forcibly deported in this fashion by the end of the month.

Angry protests took place across France after the police crackdown on the encampments. Since Sunday, some 140 evacuated families have mounted protests, calling on Bordeaux Mayor Alain Juppé to provide accommodations. Protesters who had been expelled from a camp in the town of Anglet used vehicles to block the highway near Bordeaux. They are trying to set up a new camp on an exhibition ground nearer Bordeaux, but are being blocked by police.

While stoking anti-immigrant sentiment, the government is giving itself the legal means to carry out mass arrests and impose expensive penalties on the families of youth who

tangle with the police. According to proposed law, parents will be held legally responsible for the actions of underage, previously-convicted children accused of violating restrictions placed on them by the justice system, and could face up to two years imprisonment and a €30,000 fine.

The malignant political atmosphere in which these measures emerge has been generated by the state campaign to ban the burqa and to discuss French “national identity”. The anti-burqa campaign was launched with the support of the bourgeois “left” parties. Last month, the French national assembly voted in favour of the anti-burqa bill with only one dissenting vote. (See: “French National Assembly vote to ban the burqa: An attack on democratic rights”)

Speaking of Sarkozy's newest measures, the neo-fascist National Front's (FN) Vice President Marine Le Pen said that Sarkozy had confirmed the views held by her party for the last 30 years.

The expulsions of Romani people and the removal of French citizenship from immigrants have evoked ominous parallels with the crimes of France's Vichy government and the Nazis against “nomads” and Jews during the Occupation.

The ruling class is aware of the similarities. Former Socialist Party (PS, *Parti Socialiste*) Prime Minister Michel Rocard told the weekly *Marianne* magazine, “When one tries to appeal to the *Front National's* electorate, those are the scandals one produces. The law on juvenile delinquents goes from individual penal responsibility to collective responsibility. We had not seen that since Vichy or the Nazis”. He called it a “politics of civil war”.

Le Post wrote, “One notices that every time the current government tries to deal with topics bearing on religious, criminal, social, or family issues, it treats them by adopting the same reasoning as Vichy legislators”.

Despite such concerns, PS criticisms on the government are from the right—from the standpoint that the government's security measures are not enough to repress popular opposition.

In a communiqué on August 18, the PS criticized the

government's plan to eliminate 3,500 police officer positions in the coming three years. It wrote, "Never before has there been such a great distance between a government's words and its actions. If the PS is criticizing the government, it is not because the government is doing too much on security, but rather that it is not really acting".

It concluded, "Behind Mr. Sarkozy's words, there is a reality which is the weakening of the state authority, in the absence of a public power capable of enforcing the law and public order".

Some members of the UMP also criticize the government's measures against the Roma. Deputies close to former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who recently founded a new party "République Solidaire", compared anti-immigrant measures with the *rafles*, or round-ups of Jews during the Nazi occupation. However, Villepin's forces are themselves profoundly implicated in the anti-Muslim policies of Sarkozy: in 2004 they participated in the government of former President Jacques Chirac, which passed a ban on Muslim headscarves in public schools.

In the final analysis, the consensus in the ruling class in favour of anti-immigrant, law-and-order measures reflects the reactionary character of capitalist politics in Europe. As a result of the global economic crisis, the political establishment as a whole sees social austerity and war in the interests of the financial aristocracy as its policy for the indefinite future. It seeks to promote a right-wing political climate in order to push through a drastic restructuring of class relations.

In the face of growing social opposition, the government is seeking to impose €100 billion in spending cuts, including massive pension reductions, over the next three years to satisfy the banks and financial markets. The economic situation for the working class continues to deteriorate. Consumer spending is declining. The unemployment rate is at 10 percent of the workforce, or 2.7 million unemployed workers. In 2009, the French economy destroyed some 337,000 jobs in the private sector, including 168,000 job cuts in the industrial sector.

The recent vote by GM workers in Strasbourg to take a 10 percent pay cut to keep their plant open is, from the standpoint of the ruling class, only a down payment on future wage cuts it will demand from workers. In the United States, the Obama administration and the trade unions have moved to impose 50 percent wage cuts on auto workers.

At the same time, the Sarkozy government nakedly defends the interests of the financial aristocracy. The recent Bettencourt scandal revealed that Sarkozy's party was obtaining illegal campaign funding from the billionaire Bettencourt family, while arranging gigantic tax refunds for them. Liliane Bettencourt received about €100 million in tax

refunds over four years under the "tax shield", a tax concession provided by the government for high-income earners. Last year, the super rich received €586 million under tax shield provisions.

The plunge in the French economy encourages the ruling class to accelerate wage and social cuts, in order to compete internationally. At the same time, the ruling class also is considering fighting major wars in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests, as part of an imperialist coalition attacking not only Afghanistan, but potentially Turkey, Egypt, or even China. (See: "Media demands France prepare for world war")

Such policies are bitterly opposed by working people. A recent poll found 70 percent of the population opposes French participation in the war in Afghanistan.

Despite a media barrage behind Sarkozy's security campaign, an August 11 CSA poll found that 69 percent did not consider Sarkozy's security policies to be viable, and 51 percent opposed depriving immigrants of French citizenship. On the other hand, 72 percent agreed that French citizens from immigrant backgrounds should be treated like other citizens, and 73 percent held social inequality responsible for urban violence and delinquency.

The turn by France's political establishment towards fascistic measures is an expression of its profound historical bankruptcy: it is increasingly impossible to reconcile the massively unpopular policies demanded by the bourgeoisie with democratic rule. As a result, new forms of police-state intimidation and state-sponsored racism are being promoted in an attempt to terrorize and divide the working class.



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