

France deports Roma en masse

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On Thursday, in a deliberately high-profile attack on the Roma community, the French government deported 93 Roma gypsies to Romania, their country of origin, in two flights from Paris and Lyon. A further flight with 100 deportees was due to leave on Friday and another on August 26.

Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux claims that 700 Roma will be deported by the end of August. He bragged on Tuesday that 51 Roma camps had been dismantled over the last three weeks, out of a target of 300.

The authorities display brutal unconcern for the suffering inflicted on these families, who face systematic persecution, poverty, unemployment and lack of access to social services. In an event that caused widespread outrage, the police, when evicting Roma families from a squat in the Paris suburb of Montreuil, separated the men from the women. They then threatened to take the children from the women if they did not submit.

President Nicolas Sarkozy and his ministers are seizing on the riots provoked by the July 17 police killing of Roma youth Luigi Dequenet, at a police checkpoint in the village of Saint Aignan, to appeal to racism and escalate anti-Roma repression.

As Sarkozy moves to deport large numbers of Roma, he is pressing ahead with further attacks on immigrants' rights, paving the way for the massive police violence.

In a July 30 speech in Grenoble, Sarkozy demanded that the government have the power to strip convicted immigrants of their nationality. This flies in the face of the constitution and European laws guaranteeing equality of citizenship rights, regardless of ethnic origins. The pretext for this speech was the police killing of Karim Boudouda near Grenoble, the day before Dequenet's death.

By giving full support to these police killings and the

subsequent use by the police of live rounds against protests in Grenoble the government is sending an unmistakable signal to the police forces that they can fire on the population at will.

Sarkozy is playing the racist and law-and-order cards to the full, in a desperate attempt to fashion a shaky national consensus for the right-wing policies he has adopted, notably in the aftermath of the financial crisis. He is deeply unpopular due to his repeated social cuts against the working class, and compromised by allegations his party accepted funding from billionaire Liliane Bettencourt while helping her evade taxes. His main foreign policy initiatives, notably the war in Afghanistan, are also overwhelmingly unpopular.

In France and abroad, the press widely notes that these measures help distract attention from Sarkozy's unpopular policies. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote: "Paris has seemed intent on using the expulsions as a political tool. Comments of the kind made by Hortefeux and [Minister of Industry Christian] Estrosi are useful for producing headlines." Estrosi has called for €30,000 fines and two-year prison sentence for parents of delinquent children.

Ministers have attacked the Roma with racist slanders. Immigrant support group *France Terre d'Asile* notes that Hortefeux' claims that Roma camps are "hotbeds of illegal trafficking, the exploitation of children for begging, prostitution or crime" are not "backed up ... by facts and figures or examples." It added, "Such things are marginal."

"The Roma are being made scapegoats," said Maria Ochoa Llido, head of the Migration and Roma department of the Council of Europe. She said the real problem is that France had failed to implement its own law requiring municipalities of 5,000 people or more to provide sites equipped for travellers. Unlike in other European countries, Roma will not have the right to work in France before 2014.

Hysterical anti-Roma propaganda is being used to accelerate ongoing police operations. Last year 10,000 Roma were deported to Romania or Bulgaria on 44 flights, of which 30 percent were forced repatriations, according to the ministry. Thursday's two flights to Romania were the 25th and 26th this year. In 2009 nearly 11,000 were repatriated, "an increase of more than 20 percent in relation to 2008," according to the French Office of Immigration and Integration.

Government claims that the deportations, with the flights paid for by the state and €300 provided for each adult and €100 for each child, are voluntary. This is disputed by Roma advocates. According to the Associated Press, they said "the repatriations were hardly voluntary, and that those who refused the offer would end up in holding centres and be sent back and eventually be sent home without funds."

The Council of Europe estimates that two thirds of Roma that have been sent back to Bucharest with financial incentives return to France. The government has announced the September 1 launch of a biometric database, dubbed Oscar, to store the fingerprints of people who undergo "assisted repatriations." Authorities will then prevent them from receiving more assisted repatriations.

The Roma, as citizens of EU countries, have the right to circulate within the EU. However, French law requires them to have a work permit, which is virtually impossible for them to obtain, and to prove that they have the means to support themselves if they intend to stay for more than three months.

There are an estimated 10 million to 12 million Roma, citizens of countries throughout Europe and beyond. Many face discrimination and high unemployment; those deported from France do not expect to find jobs in Romania or Bulgaria.

Roma have lived in France since the 15th century. With the abolition of Roma slavery in the 19th century in Moldavia, Walachia and Transylvania, the Roma Diaspora spread throughout Europe. In France there are 400,000 Roma, mostly enjoying French nationality, living in flats and practicing professions. Many are also itinerant traders relying on specially provided camps. However, because of inadequate provision, they often have to set up camp on unofficial sites.

Between 12,000 and 15,000 Roma, citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, have legally come to France

since their countries joined the European Union in 2007. According to the BBC, 10 other EU countries, including Germany, Italy, Denmark and Sweden, which also welcomed Roma, are also adopting a deportation policy. Transitory measures adopted by some 10 states, including France, limit access to work and residence rights for Romanian and Bulgarian migrants until December 12, 2013, when the restrictions will end.

The Roma communities in Bulgaria and Romania count some 750,000 and 2 million people respectively, of which a tiny proportion have emigrated to other EU countries since accession. *Le Monde* asserts that there are 22,000 in Belgium and probably more than that in Italy and Germany.

There is no serious opposition being mounted by the Socialist Party, other forces on the bourgeois "left," or the unions to the ominous turn of a government developing proto-fascist policies.

The Socialist Party and the Communist Party, while criticising Sarkozy's assertion that the immigrants are the cause of criminality, attack him from the right for not repressing the youth and the ghettos vigorously enough. Martine Aubry, mayor of Lille and first secretary of the PS, has praised the 4,000 surveillance cameras with which she has endowed her city as an example of her devotion to law and order.



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