

French government seeks European backing for its anti-Roma policy

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The French government is seeking to win support from official European institutions for its racist policy of rounding up and deporting members of the Roma community.

At a meeting of ambassadors held at the Hotel Matignon last week, French Prime Minister Francois Fillon announced that he had spoken with the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, and plans to hold a “working meeting” on the Roma issue. The meeting is due to take place in the coming days and will involve talks between those French ministers involved in the country’s anti-Roma campaign and leading European commissioners.

Fillon’s proposed meeting with EU commissioners will be followed on September 6 by a meeting in Paris: the French government has invited the immigration ministers from five major European Union states—the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece and Germany—as well as the European Commission.

The Paris meeting will also be attended by a representative of the Belgian government, the secretary of state for political asylum. Belgium currently holds the rotating six-month presidency of the EU. Notably, the two member states of the European Union to which the French Roma are being deported—Romania and Bulgaria—have not been invited to attend the Paris meeting.

In addition to seeking support for its deportation policy, it is expected that the French delegation will seek to challenge Romania’s bid for full rights as a member of the European Union. The French EU affairs secretary, Pierre Lellouche, recently told the media that “the Roma issue should be a condition for Schengen membership.” Both Romania and neighbouring Bulgaria are scheduled in 2011 to join the Schengen agreement of 1985 that abolished border controls

between EU member states.

French plans for a European initiative to support its persecution of Roma coincide with an intensification of deportations. Last Wednesday, French Immigration Minister Eric Besson declared that the government was stepping up its campaign to deport Roma back to Romania and Bulgaria, noting that more than 8,000 had been deported since the start of the year. One day later a further 284 Roma were dispatched to Romania from airports in Paris and Lyon.

While Besson has declared that many of those repatriated left “voluntarily”, the AFP news agency cites one 20-year-old Roma man who said, “The police told us to choose: either we willingly left now or we would be forcibly removed later”.

The French government has every reason to believe it can rely on the backing of the European Commission for its racist campaign. Despite the fact that a European Union report published last year identified the Roma as the single most persecuted minority group in Europe, the leading bodies of the EU have refused to lift a finger to alleviate their plight.

The most vocal support for the policy of the French government has come from Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, who praised the French mass deportations and made clear that he would be pressing for EU endorsement of the automatic expulsion of Roma at the Paris summit. Following Maroni’s comments, some critical media outlets titled the upcoming Paris meeting quite correctly as an “anti-Roma summit”.

Maroni also plans to use the meeting to argue for an expansion of the category of those to be targeted for deportation. According to Maroni, “[I]f anything, it’s time to go a step further” and consider measures such as “the mandatory expulsion of EU citizens who cannot

sustain themselves financially”. Maroni had previously told one newspaper that Paris was “simply copying Italy”.

The Italian government commenced its own persecution of the Roma two years ago. Following sensationalised reports in the Italian press of the criminal activities of a handful of Roma, the Italian government launched a vicious campaign. In May 2008, Maroni, a leading member of the right-wing separatist Northern League, declared, “All Romani camps will have to be dismantled right away, and the inhabitants will be either expelled or incarcerated”.

Just two days later, a mob of 60 people attacked a Roma camp in Naples with Molotov cocktails. The attack was justified by Maroni, who warned, “That is what happens when Gypsies steal babies, or Romanians commit sexual violence”.

In the same month, the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared a state of emergency. Based on a law originally introduced under the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, he introduced a series of extraordinary measures including the fingerprinting and photographing of all affected persons, including children.

As part of the government’s campaign against Roma and other minorities in Italy—described by Berlusconi at the time as an “an army of evil”—vigilante patrols were established in local communities. Interior Minister Maroni then proceeded to introduce fundamental changes to Italian immigration law. Residency in the country without appropriate papers was made a criminal offence and a point system tied to residence visas was established.

Other countries that have agreed to attend the Paris meeting have undertaken their own measures to deport Roma, while attracting less media attention than the French and Italian governments. Germany is preparing to deport 12,000 Roma to Kosovo following a deal thrashed out last April between the German government and the regime in Pristina. The majority of the nearly 6,000 children and adolescents earmarked for deportation were either born or grew up in Germany. They speak neither Serbian nor Albanian and will therefore be hugely disadvantaged in Kosovo.

Expulsions and hate attacks against Roma have also been recorded in Northern Ireland, Greece and a series of Eastern European countries. In Denmark, the

municipal council of Copenhagen called upon the government for aid earlier this month to expel several hundred Roma living in a settlement in the city. In nearby Belgium, a caravan of around 700 people has been granted a short-term permit to remain in French-speaking Wallonia after being driven out of adjoining Flanders.

In every case, right-wing governments across Europe have been able to carry out such policies with the backing of a broad party consensus, including significant sections of the European Social Democracy.

European political institutions have refused to intervene against the wave of persecution. The official position of the European Commission to the latest French campaign against Roma was spelled out by a spokesman who declared at the end of July that it was up to individual member states to decide on policy towards their Roma communities.

“We’re not here, as the European Commission, to judge on individual cases of Roma people. It’s for each government, each authority to make those decisions”, Matthew Newman, spokesman for justice and human rights, told a press conference. The only stipulation put forward by the EC spokesman was to advise governments to exercise a degree of “proportionality” in their actions.

The persecution of the Roma by governments across Europe, with the complicity of the European Union, is a vile and conscious attempt to divide the working class and create a scapegoat for the social consequences of the deepening economic crisis across the continent. It is linked to a wider campaign to whip up racist sentiments against Muslims, other minorities and broader social groups. This is the significance of Maroni’s pledge “to go a step further” and extend the campaign of persecution and deportation to all those who are incapable of “sustaining themselves financially”.



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