

The persecution of Roma—under the Nazis and today

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The attempt of European Union commissioner Viviane Reding to make the French government accountable for its mass deportation of Roma came to a grinding halt after a few hours.

After the head of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso and a number of European heads of government had criticised her choice of words, Reding apologised for drawing parallels with the deportations carried out by the Nazis. French President Nicolas Sarkozy indignantly rejected the charges made by Reding and insisted that his government would not budge in its deportation policy. Sarkozy's stance immediately won the support of the Italian head of government, Silvio Berlusconi.

At the EU summit on Thursday, Sarkozy then lashed out at Barroso in what most observers regarded as a further undermining of the status of the Commission by the most powerful member states. Now the 27 European heads of state and government have agreed to address “a long-term strategy for the solution of the problem” at their next meeting.

This gives rise to the fear that the dispute over the Roma is merely the starting point for the removal of one of the few freedoms granted by the European Union to workers up to now—free movement, the right to live and work in any EU member country. Even prior to the outbreak of the current conflict, EU Commission President Barroso had told the Spanish newspaper *El País* on 9 September, “It is a mistake to say that freedom of movement is absolute”.

It would appear that nationalism—and the xenophobia and racism bound up with it—is advancing irresistibly across Europe, irrespective of the reservations made by individual representatives of the ruling elite such as Reding. In the process, human rights and citizen's rights are being swept aside. Why?

Sarkozy's attacks against the Roma are not popular. His poll ratings are at an all time low, as are those of his Italian colleague Berlusconi. Sarkozy's campaign against a tiny minority of Roma—of the 65 million inhabitants of France just 15,000 are Roma with foreign passports—together with his discrimination against Muslims, represent a despicable attempt to divert increasing social tensions into racist channels.

So far, Sarkozy has been unsuccessful. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets to protest against the Roma deportations. And just a few days ago, three million protested against his pension reform.

Nevertheless, the efforts to stir up racist and anti-Muslim sentiments are multiplying—and not only in France. In Holland, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Hungary and other countries, racist parties, thanks to support from well-heeled financial backers, are able to exert considerable influence. In Germany, the recent publication of a book by Thilo Sarrazin, promoted by much of the media, was used to whip up racist prejudices against Muslims.

Ultimately, this wave of nationalism and racial filth cannot be reduced to the personal inclination of this or that reactionary politician. The trend is far too widespread. It is the result of the decline and rottenness of capitalist society, from which the vices of the past are growing like maggots.

The increase in social inequality—the accumulation of privileges and wealth by a tiny minority and a huge increase of unemployment and poverty for broad masses—is incompatible with democracy and human rights. The ruling class is embracing xenophobia and racism like an alcoholic reaches for the bottle—even if he recognizes in sober moments that this leads to disaster.

At the start of the Second World War, Leon Trotsky

cogently drew out the connection between the decay of capitalism and increasing anti-Semitism whose murderous consequences he anticipated:

“The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded.... The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism. In the epoch of its rise, capitalism took the Jewish people out of the ghetto and utilised them as an instrument in its commercial expansion. Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison”.

Today the witch-hunting of Muslims has taken the place of anti-Semitism (although in some countries such as Hungary, anti-Semitism is also on the agenda). Muslim workers from Turkey and the Maghreb were brought to Europe as manpower during the economic boom. Today they are the first to lose their jobs and be subjected to social exclusion and eventual deportation.

The persecution of the Roma, however, has remained consistent. After the Jews, they were the most important group to be targeted for the Nazi genocide. The Nazis classified them as racially inferior, subjected them to forced sterilisation, locked them up in “gypsy camps”, employed them as forced labourers and systematically murdered them in the concentration camps.

Around one million Sinti and Roma lived in Europe prior to Second World War. It has never been exactly established how many of them were murdered. Modest estimates declare that a quarter of them were killed by the Nazis and their allies. Other estimates put the number of victims at 500,000.

The fact that Sarkozy and his government have once again made the Roma the target of their racist campaign proves how little has changed since. Even the most terrible crime of the Twentieth Century is insufficient to deter them from spreading their racial poison.

European Union commissioner Reding called the French policy a “disgrace”. This is a polite

understatement of what is really taking place. Even so she was forced to apologise under the pressure of European governments. This demonstrates that the European elite have learnt nothing. There is no appreciable support within its ranks for basic civil and human rights, which were once the hallmarks of revolutionary France.

Europe is once again being transformed into “the foul prison” described by Trotsky, with all the associated horrors. Only an offensive by the working class for a socialist Europe can put an end to this fatal development.

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