

French National Assembly debates anti-immigration law

Kumaran Ira
7 October 2010

On September 28, the French National Assembly began debating a bill to toughen immigration policies. Like the banning of the burqa and the targeted deportation of Roma from France, the bill is a part of a wave of anti-democratic measures by the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. He is responding to mounting opposition to his anti-working-class policies by appealing to the neo-fascist vote.

The ongoing debate of the bill takes place as the European Union (EU) backed down from previous criticisms of Sarkozy's policy of ethnically targeting Roma for deportation from France. On September 30, the EU decided to postpone disciplinary action on the absurd grounds that there was no evidence that the French government was discriminating against the Roma. However, leaked French government documents clearly established that Sarkozy had ordered police to specifically target Roma camps for dismantling.

If passed, the current bill would be the fifth immigration law in seven years. The bill restricts the rights of undocumented workers, including EU citizens, facilitating their expulsion. The government plans to transcribe some of the measures existing in EU immigration directives into French law. Among the EU immigration rules, the "return directive" facilitates the expulsion of illegal immigrants and imposes an EU-wide re-entry ban.

The bill allows for those expelled from France to be banned from returning to France and any other countries covered by the "Schengen" agreement, for up to five years after their expulsion. During this period, the foreigner is not even allowed to enter France legally.

In defending the bill, shortly before the debate began in the National Assembly, French Immigration Minister Eric Besson told France 24: "We want to promote legal immigration, particularly for work; we want to fight against the networks of illegal immigration, and we also want to harmonise our policies with regards to asylum-seekers, cooperating with the source countries that migrants come from."

The bill provides for the creation of ad hoc transit zones to detain groups of foreigners entering France without passing through an established border entry. Today, such zones already exist in airports, ports and overseas railway stations. As the transit zones are not considered part of French territory, individual detained in them have restricted rights and face rapid deportation.

The US-based civil liberties group Human Rights Watch has already criticized French authorities for placing unaccompanied children in transit zones. The authorities deport children to their countries of origin without checking whether their families or child protection services can care for them upon return.

Until now, a gravely ill foreigner can stay in France if he cannot get appropriate treatment in his country. The bill limits offering a residence permit for people who are critically ill in France.

The bill also calls for immigrants seeking to obtain French nationality to adhere to "the essential principles and values of the republic" and requires immigrants to sign a "charter of the rights and duties of the French citizen."

The most controversial measure in the bill is the removal of French citizenship from foreign-born immigrants naturalized less than 10 years ago if they commit certain crimes, such as a confrontation with public authorities. Sarkozy explicitly called for such a measure in his now infamous law-and-order speech on July 30 in Grenoble, saying: "It must be possible to remove the citizenship of any person of foreign origin who voluntarily threatened the life of a policeman, law enforcement agent, or any representative of state authority."

The measure violates Article 1 of the constitution, which states: "France guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, without distinction of origin, race, or religion."

Sarkozy is preparing anti-immigration measures in the midst of rising popular opposition to his social austerity policies, such as the unpopular pension cuts. His 2011 budget aims to reduce social spending by €40 billion in

order to cut the budget deficit from 8.5 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product.

Deeply discredited and with an unpopularity rate of 72 percent, Sarkozy and his government are in deep crisis. Sarkozy's campaign against immigrants is an attempt to divert this broad popular opposition with the promotion of xenophobia aimed at dividing the working class.

His government has a target this year of deporting 30,000 undocumented immigrants from France. By June of this year, 15,000 had already been deported.

In particular, the policy of removing citizenship from recently naturalized citizens has provoked widespread commentary—the last time the French state applied such measures was under the Vichy regime that collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. These policies were aimed largely at Jews, who were rounded up and deported in large numbers. Some 73,000 French Jews died while in deportation.

As the daily *Le Monde* noted, “In France the Vichy regime created—on July 22, 1940—a commission to review 50,000 naturalizations performed since 1927. Some 15,000 people, of whom 40 percent were Jewish, lost their citizenship in the name of ‘rectifying the errors of the past’.”

French officials have responded to such concerns by denying all parallels and engaging in political provocations. Immigration Minister Besson provocatively and paternalistically called for immigrants to be made into “good little Frenchmen.”

The day before presenting the bill, he told the daily *Le Parisien*: “It may shock you if foreigners become ‘good little Frenchmen,’ I think this is excellent news. Being ‘good Frenchmen,’ that does not mean going back on one’s history, one’s origins, or one’s French culture. If my ministry can be a machine to manufacture good Frenchmen, I will be very happy.”

Besson’s casual use of the term is itself a provocation, as Jews or people with left-wing views were often denounced to the fascist authorities for not being “good Frenchmen”. In one famous case, Vichy Interior Minister Pierre Pucheu selected 50 communist hostages—including Guy Môquet and the Trotskyist Marc Bourhis—to be executed as a reprisal for the killing of German commandant Karl Hotz. Pucheu justified his choice by explaining that the alternative, a list of ex-soldiers, consisted of “good Frenchmen”.

The government is able to carry out these policies because it faces no serious political opposition from the so-called “left”—the bourgeois Parti Socialiste (PS) and its defenders

like the petty-bourgeois Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), which compromise with Sarkozy's anti-democratic measures and social austerity policies. Such forces are both hostile to and incapable of mobilizing the working class to oppose Sarkozy’s neo-fascistic policies.

These policies are politically boosting the neo-fascist *Front National* (FN), as his advisors have told the press. However, their comments make clear that Sarkozy—who is conscious that there is no significant opposition from the “left” to his fascistic measures—intends to continue moving further to the right, to keep control of the neo-fascist vote.

On September 30, the daily *Le Parisien* published an article saying that the upcoming presidential election in 2012 could produce a similar scenario to that of the 2002 presidential election. That election produced a second round run-off between conservative Jacques Chirac and FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, who overtook the PS candidate, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. In 2012, however, Sarkozy’s advisors fear that the UMP could be overtaken by the FN.

Le Parisien cited comments by Le Pen’s daughter Marine, who is also a rising FN leader: “We might perhaps arrive on the second round because of the divisions in the right and its broken promises. Our goal for surviving to the second round would perhaps be between 16 and 20 percent” of the vote. *Le Parisien* added that “one third of UMP sympathizers have a positive image of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter.”

The FN vote rose significantly in the March regional election, reaching 13 percent. *Le Parisien* commented: “With the March regional elections characterized by a rising far-right, the president has turned sharply to the right, culminating this summer with the Grenoble speech.... Nicolas Sarkozy considers the threat from Marine Le Pen to be real. Eighteen months before the presidential elections, Sarkozy’s strategists have decided to compete on the FN’s political territory, to win back those who voted for [Sarkozy] in 2007. This summer’s excessiveness on law and order is the proof.”



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