

French Football Federation considers racial quotas

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The publication of discussions inside the leadership of the French Football Federation (FFF) on introducing racial quotas into national football academies has exposed the impact of years of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies on French society.

Sports Minister Chantal Joanno has been obliged to suspend the FFF's national technical director, Francois Blanquart, a government appointee.

The transcript of a discussion on November 8 last year, involving some 20 FFF officials, reveals the leadership's desire to limit to 30 percent or less recruitment of boys with foreign parents, specifically from Africa, to the organisation's training programmes for highly promising youngsters from the age of 12.

Eric Mombaerts, trainer for the French 20-year-olds team, reacts to a recent audit carried out by the National Football institute based in the training centre at Clairefontaine, which shows that only 4 graduates from the school played for the French national team. On the other hand, 26 had gone on to play for other countries.

Laurent Blanc the national team manager exclaims : "That shocks memore than anything."

Mombaerts asks: "we put a limit on the number of kids who may change nationality? Yes? No? Then in that case, we'll have to do it on the quiet."

Blanc blurts out: "I'm completely in favour of it...In my opinion we'll have to eradicate it. There's nothing racist about it or anything. When people wear the national team shirt at 16, 18, 19, 20... and then they go and play in North African or African teams, that bothers me enormously."

Erick Mombaerts: "So it'll have to be 30 percent? A third of the kids who may change nationality."

François Blanquart: "Not even that. We can make an unspoken limit, based on a sort of quota. In fact the ideal that is, but not officially."

A discussion ensued on how the FFF might try to imbue the young hopefuls with patriotism, so that they will not

want to play for the countries from which their parents originate. Mombaerts said clubs such as Olympique de Lyons and Olympique de Marseille apply limits «systematically».

Blanc then started to develop a racial theory on black players' physical characteristics and style of play—blacks are "tall, muscular, strong—and argued for training for 12 to 14-year-olds to "have other criteria, modified with our own culture...our history, etc. The Spanish have told me 'We don't have a problem. We don't have any blacks.' He went on to assert: "the game, it's intelligence. So, other types of players."

Francis Smerecki, who trains the 12- and 13-year-olds, angrily interjected: "This is discrimination."

Mohammed Belkacemi, France's national technical adviser for neighbourhood football, revealed on Wednesday that he had made the recording of the November 8 meeting, "in order to make known internally the unspeakable talk I had heard. I handed the recording to the FFF on November 9."

Le Parisien reported that a friend of Belkacemi had told the paper that he had made previous recordings and that "he was not the only one to do so, because of the many tendentious things said in meetings."

Lilian Thuram, the former national team captain and member of the 1998 world-cup winning team, expressed his disgust: "When will people stop coming out with these prejudices about skin colour? When will people stop saying when you're a black, you can run quickly.....you're less intelligent." He added, "If some have gone along with a project with quotas, they must be punished."

Blanc's racist positions, predictably, received support from France's bourgeois "left." Malek Boutih, the Socialist Party national secretary for social questions, defended Blanc's comments in *Le Monde* of May 5, stressing that Blanc had at least got the team to sing the Marseillaise, the French national anthem.

These reactions reflect the spread of anti-democratic sentiments and open racism in large parts of the French political elite in recent years, as the state made incessant assaults on the working class and vulnerable minorities. While publicly repeating bland slogans claiming that France's "bleu-blanc-rouge" (blue, white and red) national colours could be overlaid with "black-blanc-beur" (black, white, Arab) racial harmony, politicians and media figures increasingly vented their rage at Muslims and immigrants.

The 2003 legislation banning girls from wearing the Islamic headscarf in public schools began an escalating campaign to divide the working class with anti-immigrant racism.

The banning of the veil was supported by the entire French left including the LCR, forerunner of the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party). After urban youth riots in 2005 and the mass movement of the youth in 2006 against the CPE (First Job Contract) led to Sarkozy's election campaign, where his Socialist Party challenger Ségolène Royal vied with him on law-and-order and the repression of the youth, immigration control and national chauvinism.

The revolt of the ghetto youth against French imperialist chauvinism was intensified by the so-called war on terror launched by US president George W. Bush in the aftermath of the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001 followed by the US-led neo-colonial invasion of Afghanistan supported by France which has 4,000 troops there today.

During a 2001 France-Algeria match at the *Stade de France* in Paris, barely a month after the 9/11 attacks and President George W. Bush's declaration of the "war on terror", the French national anthem was whistled at by supporters of the visiting team. "Left" and right politicians were scandalised and increasingly demanded punishment. Nonetheless, the whistling of the *Marseillaise* became a regular feature of matches with teams from the Maghreb, which was formerly part of the French colonial empire, leading to right-wing denunciations in the French press.

Media incitement of public hostility to Magrébin opposition to French imperialism was part of a broader encouragement of neo-colonial sentiment, including attempts to censor criticism of French colonialism in school textbooks. This ultimately helped create an atmosphere in which the French government's attack on Libya produced no opposition in the political establishment.

Amid rising popular opposition to his policies of war and social cuts, current President Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to divert popular discontent through ever more virulent Islamophobic appeals. He had set up the anti-burqa commission in June 2009, supported by the entire political establishment which, amid incessant anti-Muslim media hype, led to the law banning the burqa that came into effect on April 11 this year. In his infamous Grenoble speech on July 30, 2010, Sarkozy called for the mass expulsion of Roma and for the stripping of French nationality from immigrants who fell afoul of the law.

Last year this racist campaign publicly spilled into French football. The embarrassing defeat of the national team in the July 2010 world cup in South Africa—where dissension with the FFF officials led to a players' training strike—was met with a wave of anti-worker, anti-immigrant rants from the media and the political elites. Commentators decried that the "outlook of the *banlieues*" [working-class suburbs] was being brought into the game.

Right-wing philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, declared: "We have the frightful proof that the French team is a gang of yobs, which knows only the morality of the mafia."

Benjamin Lancar, for the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) youth movement's official spokesman, ranted against "scum, paid €500,000 or €1 million a month." Emmanuel Petit, who played in the 1998 team, spoke of the "the Islamisation of the team."

The PS included in its draft programme for the 2012 elections a chauvinist diatribe against the team: "those millionaire players who, wearing the tricolor strip during the World Cup, went on a football strike before being ingloriously eliminated and nevertheless clung on to their bonuses."

It is in this toxic, right-wing climate that explains the sudden revelations of racist prejudice at the top of the FFF.



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