

French government admits to wiretapping journalists in Bettencourt scandal

Antoine Lerougetel, Alex Lantier
9 September 2011

On September 1, France's Interior Minister Claude Guéant admitted that last July French domestic intelligence spied on telephone conversations of Gérard Davet, a reporter at France's daily of record, *Le Monde*. This followed a year of denials by Guéant and other officials including President Nicolas Sarkozy—in the face of a complaint by *Le Monde*—that any such spying had taken place.

Guéant confirmed that France's DCRI (Central Interior Information Service) had “localized telephone conversations” of Davet. The purpose of this operation was to discover the sources of Davet's reporting on legal investigations of L'Oréal billionaire Liliane Bettencourt. Guéant added briefly that the courts would “decide the state of affairs” regarding the legality of the police wiretaps.

Last summer the DCRI ordered Orange, the telephone provider, to give them detailed lists of calls (*fadettes*) made by Davet. This enabled them to subsequently identify the whistleblower, David Sénat, who worked in the department of justice. He was sacked.

This behavior is in flagrant violation of French press laws. Thus *Le Monde* cited a January 4, 2010 press law, one section of which states: “The secrecy of journalists' sources cannot be directly or indirectly harmed.”

DCRI chief Bernard Squarcini and Frédéric Péchenard, the head of the national police, face an inquiry by investigative magistrate Sylvia Zimmermann. They reportedly plan to invoke “the national interest” to justify the surveillance, triggering a law which would no longer require explicit judicial authorization for such wiretaps. However, *Le Monde* has cited a 1999 commission that ruled that this law does not apply to wiretaps of communications between individuals, claiming that this invalidates their defense

strategy.

There are conflicting reports on how the Sarkozy administration plans to deal with the case, and whether Guéant or former Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux—both close associates of Sarkozy—will be implicated.

Guéant himself has said that there would be no legal penalties for Squarcini or Péchenard. However, *Le Monde* quoted an anonymous presidential staffer as saying: “I think Bernard Squarcini will not be able to hang on very long. If he says, ‘It was all me,’ the game is up.”

The explosive character of Guéant's admission arises both from the blatant illegality of the state's conduct, and the purpose of the wiretaps themselves: They aimed to prevent public discussion of the Sarkozy administration's collaboration with the super-rich in planning unpopular attacks on workers' living standards.

Davet's reports included revelations that Bettencourt illegally funded Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign and helped find a high-paying job for the wife of then-Finance Minister Eric Woerth. At the time, Woerth was negotiating a major pension cut with France's trade unions, in complete defiance of public opinion, and pushing this legislation through parliament (See “Bettencourt tax-evasion scandal rocks French government”)

Anger at the Bettencourt affair and the cuts provoked a series of large demonstrations and industrial strikes last October, which were ultimately strangled by the union bureaucracy and France's middle-class, pseudo-left parties.

These developments expose the profound degeneration of French bourgeois democracy. As in the United States, Britain and other Western imperialist

powers, the promotion of law-and-order hysteria and the “war on terror” have freed the spy agencies—both foreign and domestic—from any meaningful oversight.

France’s executive branch now tramples upon press freedoms and other basic democratic rights, defending the social interests of a narrow financial oligarchy using methods worthy of a police state.

The wiretapping of *Le Monde* is one of the latest in a series of deeply anti-democratic measures promoted by the Sarkozy administration, which has attempted to incite anti-Muslim and other ethnic hatreds, to appeal to the neo-fascist vote and divide the working class. These measures include the banning of the burqa in defiance of the constitutional principle of state neutrality in religious affairs, and the targeted ethnic deportation of the Roma.

This is part of a broader shift by the bourgeoisie internationally toward police-state forms of rule to suppress social anger and opposition—most flagrantly, in police round-ups of 30,000 people by the British state in response to last month’s riots in London and other British cities.

This rapid right-wing shift is supported by all factions of the bourgeoisie. In France, bourgeois “left” parties, including the big-business Socialist Party (PS), have supported Sarkozy’s anti-democratic policies—helping launch France’s participation in the Afghan war, participating in the formulation of Sarkozy’s burqa ban, and promoting law-and-order measures.

In this context, the attempt by the PS to pose as a defender of press freedoms and a principled opponent of Sarkozy is cynical and false.

PS First Secretary Martine Aubry, a contestant for the PS nomination for the 2012 presidential elections, declared that the matter was “very serious.” She added: “Starting next week, we will use the re-opening of parliament to publicly comment on this matter to the government. If it becomes necessary, we will consider the possibility of asking for the formation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry.”

PS spokesman Benoît Hamon concurred with Aubry’s comments, though he noted, “Of course, others in the past committed the same errors.”

This was apparently a discreet reference to the fact that President François Mitterrand of the PS carried out illegal wire-tapping on an industrial scale during his first term—including against *Le Monde*

journalists—after he began his “austerity turn” to attack workers’ living standards. Several of his surviving aides were found guilty of offenses in this scandal in 2005.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact