

Political issues in the arson attack on France's Charlie Hebdo magazine

Alex Lantier

17 November 2011

The arson attack on the offices of the satirical cartoon weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris has provided the occasion for a great deal of posturing by the French political establishment. Even before the identity or the motives of the attackers were established, politicians and the press began a racist campaign, posing as defenders of democratic rights threatened by Islam.

In fact, more questions than answers remain about the crime, and the identity and motives of its perpetrators. *Charlie Hebdo's* offices burned in the early morning of November 2, the day of publication of an issue featuring the filthy provocations against Islam that has become *Charlie Hebdo's* trademark. Entitled "Sharia Hebdo," it included caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed and of his genitalia. It also criticized the newly-installed, Western-backed Islamist regimes in Tunisia and Libya.

It is assumed the fire was caused by one or several incendiary devices thrown into the offices; two hooded men were seen leaving the area around the time the fire broke out. The perpetrators have still not been identified, and police claim to have no information on their identity. Oddly, no individual or organization has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Anti-Terrorist Section (SAT) investigators told the daily *Libération* that *Charlie Hebdo* had moved to the offices only three weeks before. The offices were nondescript, located "behind opaque windows without any sign or logo" identifying them as belonging to *Charlie Hebdo*.

A Turkish Islamist group, Cyber Warrior, hacked *Charlie Hebdo's* web site later on November 2, but expressed its opposition to the burning of the weekly's offices.

On November 3-4, the US social networking web site Facebook—seemingly an unlikely ally of Islamist terrorists—suddenly shut down *Charlie Hebdo's* Facebook pages. It closed *Charlie Hebdo's* personal Facebook page, on the pretext that *Charlie Hebdo* is not a person. It then cancelled *Charlie Hebdo's* administrative privileges over its official Facebook page, claiming the weekly had posted "sexually explicit images." The official page was soon flooded with un-moderated hostile comments, and *Charlie Hebdo* had to close down this page, as well.

Before any solid information was available on the arson attack, politicians and press outlets of various stripes unleashed a firestorm, posing as defenders of democracy against an Islamist menace supposedly exemplified by the arson attack. The entire political establishment united on a right-wing, anti-Muslim line, on the false pretext of defending free speech.

Asked if he was investigating leads on "fundamentalist Muslims," Interior Minister Claude Guéant said it would be important "not to neglect this possibility." He added, "If certain people believe they can impose a manner of thinking on the French Republic ... they are wrong, we will fight them, the French will not accept such imperialism."

The bourgeois "left" Socialist Party's (PS) first secretary, Martine Aubry, expressed her "solidarity" with the magazine, saying: "Freedom of the press is also exercised through humor and derision." SOS-Racism, a group with ties to the PS and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), organized a demonstration in support of *Charlie Hebdo*.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, now running as the Communist Party's candidate for the 2012 presidential elections, told *Europe 1* radio: "I wish to express my friendship, my affection for the *Charlie Hebdo* team." He also suggested that the instigators of the attack were Muslims in France, calling for "the intellectual discipline to not confuse a few idiots, scoundrels who will be severely punished, I hope, with the mass of our Muslim compatriots who practice their faith in all tranquility."

The daily *Le Figaro* even made a point of contacting neo-fascist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen—who was visiting Washington, DC—to ask her opinion of the affair. She asserted, "This is not the first time fundamentalist Islamists allow themselves to impose their interdicts on France. This is a rejection of the French political model and of secularism."

Le Monde, a center-left daily, expressed the same basic view. In a November 2 editorial, "Why one must support *Charlie Hebdo*," it wrote: "Nothing can justify attacks against the web site of a publication or the burning of its premises to express one's disagreement with its content. ... Freedom of expression and of

artistic creation is one of the essential values of our democracy. It is useful to recall this for people who, under cover of fighting Islamophobia or Christianophobia, promote intolerance.”

Far more is being asserted here than simply the uncontroversial observation that an arson attack on a publication—even one as tasteless as *Charlie Hebdo*—is politically reactionary. With varying degrees of hysteria, politicians and editorialists are presenting the French political establishment as a democratic bastion besieged by hordes of intolerant Muslims. This stands reality on its head.

The right-wing government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has waged a continuous war on democratic rights, relying on the support or acquiescence of forces like the PS and NPA at every critical moment. After proposing an unconstitutional ban on the burqa in 2009—now in force—Sarkozy had Guéant carry out the blatantly illegal, ethnically-based deportations of the Roma in 2010.

Muslim “imperialism” does not threaten France; on the contrary, Muslim and other ex-colonial peoples face an explosion of French and Western imperialism. Paris now functions openly as an assistant of Washington, dispatching troops to help the US occupy Afghanistan, or to topple governments in Côte d’Ivoire and beyond. France played a leading role this spring in launching NATO’s war of aggression in Libya. Oil and other vital resources are at stake in each case.

Official political incitement of ethno-religious hatred, aiming to divide the working class and suppress opposition to imperialist wars, is encouraging wider far-right moods. A week after the *Charlie Hebdo* arson attack, a fascist group took responsibility for burning a wall of a mosque in Montbéliard—the 24th attack on a mosque in France since the beginning of 2011, according to AFP dispatches in *Le Monde*. The paper did not publish an editorial on the mosque attacks, however, and the press largely ignored the matter.

The ruling elite’s aggressive posturing as defenders of democratic rights against Islam must be judged in the context of this deep decay of French democracy. It is part of a broader campaign to terrorize the working class, and particularly workers and young people of North African descent—whose mass riots against police brutality in 2005 and 2007 terrified the French ruling elite, which then reacted by imposing emergency rule and kangaroo-court proceedings.

If France’s political upper echelons unanimously came to the defense of *Charlie Hebdo*, it is because they know the magazine’s editorial board can be relied upon to defend and promote such right-wing policies. Its unorthodox image notwithstanding, *Charlie Hebdo* has become a thoroughly establishment publication. As its formal editor Philippe Val noted in a 2010 interview with *Le Courrier* of Geneva, its editorial board includes “all the components of the Plural Left [the 1997-2002 governing coalition

that included the PS, the Stalinist Communist Party, and the Greens], including abstentionists.”

The magazine has been at the center of several key provocations, particularly against Muslims. In February 2006—shortly after the repression of the mass suburban riots in the fall of 2005—*Charlie Hebdo* became the first French publication to repost the right-wing Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*’s caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

On March 1, 2006 it published a manifesto that—echoing the American right’s denunciations of “Islamofascism”—attacked Islamism as a “global totalitarian menace,” comparable to “fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism.”

Charlie Hebdo was recognized and rewarded for its pains. Two weeks later the magazine’s editorial board attended a gala dinner at the Ministry of Culture, where then-Culture Minister Henri Paul praised them as “actors of liberty.”

That year *Charlie Hebdo* posted unusually large profits, largely due, *Le Monde* noted, to “extraordinary sales of the special issue including the caricatures of Mohammed,” which received massive publicity. *Charlie Hebdo*’s top four editors and cartoonists took the bulk of the profits, splitting 825,000 euros between them.

The corrupt and discredited French political elite permits itself some self-righteous indignation over the arson attack against *Charlie Hebdo* knowing full well that the magazine’s editors will not poke fun at any of the truly farcical aspects of this affair: Sarkozy’s super-cop Guéant expressing his outrage at “imperialism”; Marine Le Pen, the Catholic neo-fascist and anti-American, promoting “secularism” while discreetly on tour in Washington; or the Socialist Party’s top bureaucrat, the colorless Martine Aubry, posturing as an advocate of “humor and derision.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact