

# Political issues in the Toulouse shootings

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Elite police units killed Mohamed Merah yesterday after a two-day standoff at his apartment in the French city of Toulouse, where Merah was suspected of killing seven people in a nine-day shooting rampage against paratroopers and Jewish schoolchildren.

As always in the beginning of such cases, one is confined to the evidence presented by the police and the media. According to their accounts, Merah said he decided to embark on this crime spree out of anger at France's role in the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, the banning of the burqa in France, and Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. Whether or not these accounts are true, Merah is guilty of a terrible crime, whatever motivation underlay the killings.

However, the attack is a political event requiring a political explanation, particularly as it comes in the context of the French presidential elections. The response of France's leading political parties is deeply cynical, aiming to exploit the tragedy to shift politics further to the right.

This event is a godsend for incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy, who is trying to burnish his right-wing, law-and-order credentials and win the election despite his deep unpopularity.

The shootings have also boosted Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

Recovered from the initial fright that her campaign might be finished if the murderer turned out to be a neo-Nazi killer like Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian fascist who killed 77 people last year in attacks in Oslo and Utoya Island, she now claims the event justifies her calls for social cuts against immigrants and "war" with Islamism.

The daughter of long-time FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen—who once dismissed the Holocaust as a "detail" of World War II history—she now poses with sickening hypocrisy as a defender of France's Christian and Jewish youth.

Bringing up the rear is François Hollande, the latest political coward to run as the Socialist Party (PS) candidate. Having indicated shortly before the shootings that he would keep most of Sarkozy's social cuts and attacks on immigrants and democratic rights, calling in particular for interning the Roma in camps, he is neither able nor willing to say anything that goes against the right-wing media consensus.

How is such a tragedy to be viewed? Anyone capable of such an act of murder against innocent people is deeply disoriented, but this disorientation emerges from a definite social and political context.

Born in 1988, Merah grew up amid a series of neo-colonial wars against Muslim countries launched by the United States and its allies, including France, with ever more open contempt for international law. When he was ten, Washington was resuming its bombing of Iraq after the first Gulf War; by his twentieth birthday, over one million Iraqis had died under US occupation. He witnessed Israel's suppression of the Palestinian *intifada* and its invasions of Lebanon and Gaza, and lived through last year's NATO invasion of Libya, which Sarkozy aggressively promoted, costing at least 50,000 lives.

At the same time, the European ruling classes deepened their social attacks on the working class, while increasingly promoting neo-fascistic policies targeting immigrants to poison the political atmosphere and divide the working class along ethnic lines. In France, this took the form of the promotion of Le Pen and Sarkozy's policy of banning the burqa and targeting entire ethnic groups like the Roma for deportation.

As they turned to the right after the collapse of the USSR, the official "left" parties—the PS and its political satellites, the Communist Party and the New Anti-Capitalist Party—increasingly supported such policies quite openly, both in and out of power.

This deep corruption of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois “left” parties produced a pathological situation in which broad layers of working class Muslim youth in France were cut off from left-wing opposition to class oppression. At the same time, they were subjected to mass unemployment and vilification in the media.

Under such conditions, it seems inevitable that unstable or disoriented individuals would register their opposition through acts of violence, or even murder. It appears that Merah was one such individual. A mechanic who struggled with his temper and had a history of petty crimes, he was drawn to the army and embittered by the French Foreign Legion’s refusal to accept him as a soldier in 2010.

Ultimately, Merah was drawn to the reactionary panaceas of right-wing Islamists and took to viewing Islamist lectures to register his opposition to the victimization of Muslims. He then traveled, under unclear circumstances and with the knowledge of US and French intelligence, to Afghanistan and a number of other Muslim countries, before returning to France.

By exploiting this tragedy to justify more police-state and anti-immigrant measures, the French ruling elite is further brutalizing the working class and escalating the policies which produced Merah’s crime in the first place.

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