

France's Socialist Party government bans protests against anti-Muhammad cartoons

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After the publication of cartoons denigrating the Prophet Muhammad by the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, France's Socialist Party government ordered police prefects to prohibit any protest against cartoons and smash any protests that broke out in defiance of the ban.

The publication of cartoons comes after an anti-Islamic movie, *Innocence of Muslims*, sparked mass protests across the Muslim world against US imperialism.

Interior Minister Manuel Valls said: "I have given very firm instructions to the prefects to ban any assembly of this type. There will not be the slightest exception. These protests must be banned and dispersed."

Backing the burqa ban instituted with PS support under France's previous conservative government, as well as agitation by the neo-fascist National Front (FN) against Muslim prayers in the streets, Valls continued: "I will not allow, during these demonstrations, prayers in the streets or the wearing of full-body veils ... The country must gather together and be calm around the principle of secularism."

Though cynically phrased in the language of secularism and democratic rights, Valls' statement tramples on the democratic right to protest the contents of *Charlie Hebdo* and the policies of French and US imperialism. The government is effectively slandering all political opposition to these policies as motivated by petty criminality, in order to justify a large-scale crackdown. This exposes the profound erosion of democratic institutions, and France's accelerating slide towards police-state rule.

In an interview with the daily *Le Parisien* after prohibiting the ban, Valls said: "I am confident in French society and, just as much, in the security forces

to confront very determined individuals who are defying the Republic, coming there to provoke and drag young people into delinquency ... This government will know how to be very firm. No one should doubt that."

In its determination to crush protests, the PS is mobilizing the infrastructure of a police state that has been built up over the last decade. While deploying the police, it is monitoring Internet social networking sites and telephone networks including text messages in major cities including Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Lille, Toulouse, and Rouen.

Police in these areas are also preparing for large-scale deployments against protests. The Interior Ministry declared that "Sections and local reinforcement units are mobilized and ready to intervene if they are needed."

Over the past several days, police forces have been deployed in major cities, including over 800 CRS riot police in Paris. Traffic was stopped outside the US embassy. Paris Prefect Bernard Boucault banned protests planned on Saturday at the Trocadéro near the Eiffel Tower, and at the Great Mosque.

A demonstration was cancelled in Lyon, and a protest was banned in Lille on Saturday. According to the Interior ministry, 35 people were arrested, including women wearing burqas.

A 24-year-old railway worker, accused of protesting against the anti-Islam film outside the US embassy on September 15 and of possessing an illegal weapon, was sentenced to three months prison.

The PS is targeting not only the Muslim and immigrant population, but the working class as a whole. The police-state apparatus it is developing to crush anti-imperialist sentiment in immigrant layers of the working class will be turned on the entire working class when it moves against the PS's right-wing

policies of social austerity and imperialist war.

In the five months since his election in May, PS President François Hollande has collapsed in the polls, with his approval ratings falling 11 percent in one month. Some 56 percent of the population disapproves of his policies, and his support is also falling rapidly among voters who voted for the PS and its coalition allies, the Greens and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF).

The PS' repressive measures come as it prepares austerity measures, pro-business labour market reforms and mass layoffs that is provoking deep discontent in the working class. It is also lining up behind Washington in an unpopular proxy war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The PS is implicated by its support for anti-democratic measures—including the 2004 headscarf ban in schools and the burqa ban—pushed through in recent years by conservative governments. Now that it is in power, it is continuing these anti-democratic measures against the working class. This has encouraged further the neo-fascist Front National (FN) and other elements to press far-right proposals, shifting the political atmosphere further to the right.

FN leader Marine Le Pen has now come out in support a ban on Islamic headscarves and Jewish yarmulke headgear in streets. She told TF1: "Today, I see that the veil is spreading exponentially in our country as well as the wearing of the djellaba, I consider that it is a generalized civic pressure that is being imposed in certain neighborhoods ... I demand that the application of the 2004 law that bans wearing ostentatious symbols in schools be extended from the school to all public spaces."

Asked if "ostentatious symbols" included the yarmulke, Le Pen confirmed that in her opinion it did.

Le Pen's calls to target Judaism as well as Islam underscores yet again the reactionary implications of the French government's targeting of religious minorities under cover of promoting "secularism." It has allowed the FN to present an anti-Semitic proposal that would until recently have been denounced as a fascist provocation as part of the mainstream of French politics.

The fact that *Charlie Hebdo*'s publication of the anti-Muhammad cartoons led to this outpouring of police repression and fascistic sentiment sheds light on the

reactionary character of its decision to publish these cartoons in its issue of last Wednesday.

In recent years, *Charlie Hebdo* has repeatedly published provocative anti-Islamic material. In February 2006, shortly after the repression of the mass suburban riots in France in the fall of 2005, it reposted the right-wing Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*'s caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. On March 1, 2006 it published a manifesto echoing the American right's denunciations of "Islamofascism" and attacking Islamism as a "global totalitarian menace," comparable to "fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism."

After *Charlie Hebdo* published the 2006 anti-Islamic cartoons, which led to a press sensation and massive sales, the top editors split 825,000 euros (US\$1.07 million) between them and were invited to a gala dinner at the Ministry of Culture. The conservative Minister of Culture Henri Paul praised them as "actors of liberty."

The magazine's editorial staff, which has close ties with the PS and the PCF, doubtless expected to realize substantial financial gains by publishing the latest series of cartoons. The initial run of 75,000 copies of their latest issue has reportedly sold out quickly, amid intense coverage of the cartoons in the press.

Charlie Hebdo has thus served again as a tool for instigation of anti-Islamic sentiment and helped provide a pseudo-democratic cover for the government—which claims to be defending freedom of the press against Muslims outraged at the cartoons—as it attacks democratic rights.

The author also recommends:

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