

Vigilante mobs, right-wing protests target Roma in France

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A vigilante mob in Marseille and a right-wing protest in Lille targeted Roma camps, while France's Socialist Party government continued to persecute the Roma.

On Friday, September 28, a group of 30 local inhabitants forced the Roma to abandon a camp in Marseille's Créneaux estate—one of the city's poorer, majority-immigrant areas. The camp was then set on fire. Journalists at the scene took pictures of burned beds and other furniture.

The vigilante mob had contacted the local authorities before proceeding to destroy the encampment. According to the mayor of the area, Senator Samia Ghali of the PS, "On Thursday morning people came to see me, they were furious over the presence of the Roma."

Nonetheless, Marseille police did not stop them, and police reports drawn up after the fact claimed that there was no evidence of violence during the evictions.

Ghali has campaigned on right-wing, law-and-order themes. On August 6, she demanded that the French army intervene in Marseille to crack down on the drug trade and proposed that unemployed youth without diplomas be sent into the army. These comments reportedly provoked a cabinet-level discussion by PS officials at the Elysée presidential palace on September 6.

On September 29 in the Lille suburb of Cysoing, some 700 residents headed by local officials marched to oppose the arrival of Roma in the city. One of the marchers, who claimed to be a former soldier, said: "If they come to our city, we will kick them out like in

Marseille. Marseille has set a precedent."

A smaller counter-demonstration was organized, and passersby called the protest "racist" or "fascist."

The Cysoing march comes as PS authorities in Lille seek to find new housing for several hundred Roma they have expelled from other camps in the region. On Thursday two Roma camps near Lille were dismantled. The Hellemmes camp, home to 150 to 200 people, was evacuated in the early morning by a convoy of police vans escorted by 150 CRS riot police. The Lille Urban Community (LMCU), whose president is PS First Secretary Martine Aubry, owns the sites jointly with the French state. It has reportedly launched legal action to dismantle the camps.

The government has plans to place Roma in so-called "integration villages," where they would be forced to live in ultra-cheap prefabricated housing and would be monitored by state security forces. According to *Le Monde*, there are five such villages in Lille, with three more under construction. These so-called "villages of insertion" are ghettos in all but name.

The eruption of racist actions against the Roma is a political indictment of the PS government of President François Hollande, and petty-bourgeois "left" forces like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) that called for Hollande's election this May. In power, the PS has continued former conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy's policy of targeting the Roma for expulsion from camps and mass deportation. It bears political responsibility for these events.

It is using this witch-hunt to divert mass resentment

against austerity, rising unemployment and waves of sackings and plant closures.

The Roma are European Union (EU) citizens, often French. About 15,000-20,000 Roma are believed to live in encampments on the edges of major French cities, including up to 4,000 in Paris. During World War II, they were interned by France's fascist Vichy regime. European Union Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding compared Sarkozy's expulsions to World War II-era deportations and threatened to sue France at the European Court of Justice in 2010, but backed down.

Mob violence and protests against the Roma events expose the cynicism of PS claims to be dismantling camps only because they violate health codes. During the presidential campaign earlier this year, moreover, Hollande wrote to Roma rights groups promising that under his government, "when an unsanitary camp is dismantled, alternatives will be offered."

This was simply political cover for a racist campaign that is stirring up anti-Roma hatreds and extra-legal violence that proceeds with tacit official backing.

The incidents in Marseille and Lille come on the heels of more anti-Roma statements from the government. Interior Minister Manuel Valls said in a statement on Wednesday that court orders to remove illegal camps would be executed "with firmness". Unsanitary camps were unacceptable, he said, adding that they posed a challenge to community life in working class areas where they were often set up.

On July 31, he told *Europe 1* radio: "[Police] Prefects have a mission to dismantle Roma camps when there is a court ruling. Things are simple. Yes, when there is a court ruling the camps will be dismantled."

On September 21 Valls visited Ghali's area of Marseille—the 15th and 16th districts—together with Attorney General Christiane Taubira. They both delivered law-and-order speeches in front of Ghali's municipal office. Taubira declared, "People have to get used to the idea that the state is not leaving, that the state has returned" to Marseille.

One week later after Taubira had declared that state authority had "returned" to Marseille, a group of vigilantes attacked a Roma camp. However, this has led to no public criticism from the government. Instead, Marseille authorities on September 30 demanded that the Roma expelled from the Créneaux estate be evacuated permanently.

The character of the state authority the PS brings to Marseille is exposed by the fact that it is compatible with extra-judicial violence by right-wing mobs. Having taken over from Sarkozy, the PS is escalating his attacks on fundamental democratic rights.

In the meantime, police expulsions of Roma in France are continuing. Over the weekend 240 East European Roma were put on a flight from Lyon to Bucharest, after three camps in the Lyon area were closed down, with more than 200 Roma affected. Roma defense organizations told the press, "This is taking place after months of pressure on the encampments and evictions. These voluntary repatriations are disguised expulsions."

Early last week, a 150-person encampment at Vaulx-en-Velin and a 100-person encampment in Villeurbanne, both in the Lyon suburbs, were broken up by police. Fifty alleged squatters near the Roma camp in Villeurbanne were also evicted. These families are now reportedly wandering the streets of the Lyon metropolitan area, with the police preventing them from settling.

On Wednesday, after the recent dismantling of Roma encampments in the Paris suburbs, an eviction took place in the 19th district.



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