

French government plans ban on Islamic veil in universities

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Documents of France's High Council on Integration (HCI) sent to the government's Secularism Observatory and cited yesterday in *Le Monde* lay out plans to ban Islamic veils in universities.

The HCI's proposals are the latest move in an offensive to promote anti-Islamic and xenophobic sentiment in France by governments of the right and the bourgeois "left." The proposed ban would extend the anti-democratic ban on Islamic veils in public schools and high schools passed in 2004 under right-wing President Jacques Chirac, and the 2011 ban on full-body veils or burqas in all public places in France.

Citing rising religious tensions, the HCI claims that some universities have already adopted "concrete and calming solutions" and proposes an outright nationwide ban to avoid a "cacophony" of measures.

The HCI's presentation of its proposed ban as an attempt to calm tensions in universities is cynical and false. Such policies, which incite chauvinist prejudices and facilitate the suppression of student protests, have encouraged a reactionary political atmosphere and increasing assaults on Muslims in France. By singling out Muslims for discriminatory treatment, they violate fundamental constitutional principles, such as state neutrality in religious affairs (*laïcité*).

The HCI would ban "symbols and garments ostentatiously manifesting religious belief in classrooms, locations and situations of research or education in public institutions of higher education." The HCI goes on to oppose requests for universities to allow students to observe religious dietary restrictions or holidays.

Citing the 1984 Savary law, which specifies that students' freedom of expression "must not interfere with teaching or public order," the HCI deplores that "some universities" face "requests for excused

absences, for permission to wear religious signs, for non-participation in mixed-sex education both at the levels of students and of teachers, to contest the content of teaching, for the respect of dietary restrictions, for the granting of locations for religious worship or communitarian usage... These problems have not disappeared, but are spreading."

An examination of the ban's provisions make clear that while it is directed primarily against Muslim students, it is bound up with a broad assault on democratic rights of all students. One provision would allow university administrations to move against student protests, such as occupations of facilities: "All occupations of university facilities by a student association must be governed by an official agreement on the use of the facilities, which should never be assigned to religious ceremonies."

Another provision would ban protests against course contents, writing that universities "must include an article in their internal rules to block protests against or refusals to accept course contents."

Contacted by Agence France-Presse, Secularism Observatory head Jean-Louis Bianco tried to downplay the significance of the report. He said that the report "only engages the responsibility of the secularism mission inside the HCI, which is no longer active."

He added, "This question of wearing veils in higher education is not currently part of the plans for the work of the Secularism Observatory."

Whatever the fate of the particular ban proposed by the HCI, their preparation and the ensuing discussion in the press are part of a broad, ongoing campaign stoking public hostility to religious and ethnic minorities to divide the working class along ethnic lines. This includes not only the anti-veil policies organized in France, but also moves by officials of both the ruling

Socialist Party (PS) and of right-wing officials to dismantle Roma camps around France and deport their inhabitants.

The purpose of such racist legislation to divide the working class has consistently been to shift the political atmosphere to the right and facilitate the implementation of right-wing policies. The initial proposals for the 2004 and 2011 anti-veil and anti-burqa laws both followed the sellout of large-scale working class protests against pension cuts by conservative presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, respectively.

The current ban proposal has emerged as PS President François Hollande prepares another pension cut to be discussed this autumn and his poll ratings plunge. His government has been staggered by popular hostility to his austerity policies, his neo-colonial wars in Africa and the Middle East, and revelations that his government is engaged in large-scale Internet spying on the French people modeled on operations of the National Security Agency (NSA) revealed by Edward Snowden.

A political atmosphere marked by rising class tensions and long-standing promotion of Islamophobia has produced both rising far-right influence and attacks on Muslims, and increasing popular opposition in working class suburbs.

Last month, several Muslim women in the Paris suburb of Argenteuil reported being assaulted by racist skinheads who tore off their veils and insulted them. In a separate event, the violent apprehension and arrest by police of the family of a veiled woman in another Paris suburb, Trappes, lead to several nights of riots.

As all indications point to the coming outbreak of explosive social struggles, the Hollande government is responding to rising popular opposition with intensive intelligence surveillance of large areas in France's major cities.

According to a report in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, "Argenteuil is a powder keg that is waiting to explode, under intense surveillance by the intelligence agencies—the DCRI [Central Directorate for Interior Intelligence] and SDIG [Sub-Directorate for General Information]—whose alarming reports on Islamist radicalization are communicated to the highest levels of the state ... The worst may yet be to come."

Similar espionage is being carried out against

workers protesting job losses and wage cuts. A February article by France Info cited rising opposition among teachers, public sector workers, and Goodyear workers protesting job cuts and fears of a "social implosion" from the ruling PS and the PS-aligned Left Front.

It added, "The government has confirmed that it is carrying out surveillance of social tensions. Intelligence services are tasked with drawing up lists of mass layoffs and other critical situations. And Manuel Valls, the interior minister, openly acknowledges that this is the case."



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