

French secularism charter attacks Muslims, democratic rights

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On September 9, Vincent Peillon, the Minister of Education in France's Socialist Party (PS) government, introduced a fifteen-point charter for secularism to be posted in all state schools from the nursery to high school and strictly adhered to by teachers and pupils. Peillon explained that "schools must teach Republican values."

An explanation "kit" will be provided to each teacher to help enforce the charter, which states: "No one can invoke his religious affiliation to refuse to comply with the rules of the Republic's schools". The bureaucratic and repressive charter further seeks to stifle any questioning by students of the school curriculum: "No pupil can invoke a religious or political conviction to contest a teacher's right to deal with an issue in the curriculum".

The charter begins by claiming that France is "an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic." The charter speaks of secularism in schools as "offering pupils the conditions for developing their personality" against "all religious proselytising and any pressure."

The President of the French Council for the Muslim Religion, Dalil Boubakeur, said it was directed against Islam and risked "stigmatizing" Muslims.

The main thrust of the charter is contained in point 14, which states: "It is forbidden to wear signs or garments through which students ostentatiously exhibit religious faith." This reinforces the attack on personal liberties, particularly those of Muslims, already contained in the 2004 law passed by right-wing President Jacques Chirac and supported by the bourgeois "left," banning "ostentatious religious signs" in schools. This served effectively as a ban on Muslim girls wearing headscarves in French schools.

Muslims in France were the target of a further reactionary provocation with the 2010 law outlawing

the wearing of the burqa, or full-body veil. That ban was promoted by right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy and National Assembly deputy André Gerin of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), who headed the commission that formulated the burqa ban.

President François Hollande's PS government is taking this latest repressive initiative with unparalleled hypocrisy, posturing as "secular" while unreservedly backing the US war drive against Syria, in which France is supporting far-right Islamist opposition forces linked to Al Qaeda.

The Hollande government's charter in fact has nothing to do with the principles of secularism—the strict separation of religious bodies from the functioning of the state and the non-interference of the state in people's religious affairs. The Hollande government is also trampling basic democratic principles at home, intensifying its ethnic targeting of the Roma and mass deportations of immigrants.

Overall, the charter has been greeted by the political establishment, including pseudo-left forces, as a positive good to be used to further the ban on Muslim girls wearing scarves in universities. The charter will further encourage attacks by thugs on Muslim women wearing full body burqas, as happened recently in the town of Trappes. (See also: Riots hit Trappes, France after police arrest family of veiled Muslim woman)

The most significant feature of the reaction of political tendencies to the secularism charter is the unanimous support across the ruling establishment for the charter. Significantly, the petty-bourgeois "left" tendencies are largely aligned on the position of the neo-fascist National Front (FN). It is through this alignment on the racist campaign carried out against Muslims under the false flag of "secularism" that the petty-bourgeois "left" forces have contributed to introducing

the FN into mainstream French bourgeois politics.

The FN's communiqué on the charter calls it "a collection of principles and good intentions, absolutely without effect," calling for further racist measures targeting Muslims to strengthen the charter. It demands action to stop halal meat in school canteens, and banning mothers wearing the Islamic headscarf from accompanying their children on school trips.

The Lutte Ouvrière group (LO) has consistently supported attacks on the Muslim veil. In its statement, it supports the charter, indicating simply that in its opinion, the charter does not go very far in defending secular and scientific principles.

LO writes that the charter "announces nothing new, but at least has the merit of clearly written phrases which will facilitate the teacher's work. ... A pupil contesting the evolution of the species, the roundness of the Earth, or equality between the sexes will be reminded of the rules, which is the least one can do".

The PCF spokesman on democracy and secularism, Pierre Dharréville, also supported the charter, claiming: "Today, when the ties between the religious hierarchy and the state have been suppressed, the new secular challenge of our time is that power does not fall into the hands of a minority."

Dharréville's comment aims to stimulate hysterical fears that France's five million Muslims could fall under the political influence of the small minority of fundamentalists and jihadist extremists. In this, the PCF is also echoing the FN's poisonous propaganda.

In fact, as shown by the Syria war—which the entire petty-bourgeois "left" has supported—the greatest political force driving the global spread of jihadist forces is the foreign policy of the state itself.

The New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) takes a different tack, calling the charter "secular moralising" in an article titled "A smokescreen at school," which admits that the charter aims to divide the population along ethnic and religious lines. However, their pose of opposition to the policies of the PS—which the NPA endorsed in last year's presidential elections—is a fraud. They came out with similar, tepid criticisms of the 2004 law on the veil and the 2010 burqa ban, before ultimately falling in line with it and expelling headscarf-wearing members of their own party.

Despite its empty criticisms of racist measures passed under a false cover of defending secularism, the NPA is

thoroughly integrated into a pseudo-left social layer that is rapidly shifting to the right. In 2004, Pierre-François Grond, a high school teacher and former leading NPA member who has since joined the PCF-led Left Front, led a hysterical campaign to exclude Muslim girls wearing the headscarf from schools.

The efforts to divide the working class by stigmatizing Muslims is part of the nationalist phobia developed internationally to stop a united struggle of workers against austerity and imperialist war.

Quebec nationalists led by the Parti Québécois recently introduced its own "Quebec Charter of Values," designed to ban half a million workers from wearing religious signs in public sector jobs. In nurseries, hospitals, universities, and town halls, the Sikh turban, Jewish kippa and Muslim hijab are to be banned.

The Quebec government claims to be defending secularism and women's rights. But, as in France, this is an attack on democratic rights launched against immigrants and religious minorities.



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