

Racist provocation and the “war on terror”

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Early Wednesday morning, the new edition of *Charlie Hebdo* went on sale across France, with the press run ramped up from the usual 60,000 to 5 million. The new issue, with a degrading cartoon of the prophet Muhammad on its cover, is not a monument to “press freedom,” as portrayed in media accounts, but rather a state-supported provocation.

Through this publication and its echoes throughout the media, millions of French citizens are being bombarded by an anti-Muslim campaign that was, until recently, the province of the neo-fascist National Front. These sentiments are being deliberately whipped up to provide a base of support for renewed military operations by French imperialism.

The conduct of the “war on terror” is acquiring ever more openly a racist character.

That the campaign is being very carefully coordinated is evident in the fact that the French government paid for the enormously expanded press run, while leading journals of the French bourgeoisie made it possible: *Le Monde* supplied computers, *Libération* opened its offices to the surviving *Charlie Hebdo* staff. Prime Minister Manuel Valls dropped by to show his support.

The French government has wasted no time in utilizing the January 7 attacks to promote its war drive in the Middle East. Following Tuesday’s 488 to 1 vote in France’s National Assembly to extend air strikes in Iraq, French President François Hollande, until recently the most unpopular official in France, appeared on the deck of the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to address its crew as they set sail for the Middle East. He cited the events of the previous week, which left 20 dead in Paris, saying the situation “justifies the presence of our aircraft carrier.”

The carrier is to join the US military in the Persian Gulf, where American forces are raining bombs down on western Iraq and eastern Syria as part of the war targeting, for the present, the Islamic State in Iraq and

Syria (ISIS), with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad next in line.

The US-led coalition of imperialist powers and Gulf sheikdoms carried out 18 air strikes on Monday alone. There is little doubt that these bombing attacks slaughter more innocent people every day than the number of people who died in Paris last week, albeit with far less attention from the Western press.

On its way to the Persian Gulf, the Charles de Gaulle will pass along the coast of Yemen, giving the Hollande government the capability to launch air strikes on targets in that country. US and French officials have suggested that Said Kaouchi received military training and instructions in Yemen from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. There have been unconfirmed suggestions in the media that a massive attack on Yemen, either by French warplanes or US drone missiles, or both, is imminent.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attack is also being used to rapidly escalate the other component of the “war on terror”—the assault on democratic rights at home.

Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, describing the mobilization of 10,000 French troops to stand guard at public transport centers, schools and other supposed targets of terrorist attack, said Tuesday, “This is a military operation like the military operations we conduct abroad,” directed at “the same enemy.” He added that “today, the new and serious element is that there is no dividing line between the external threat and the internal threat.”

While claiming to defend “freedom of speech” at *Charlie Hebdo*, the French authorities have arrested at least 54 people for “defending terrorism”—that is, for speech, including posts on social media. Four of those arrested are minors, and some have already been convicted and sentenced under legislation that provides for expedited trials.

Alongside the crackdown on public expressions of

sympathy with Islamic fundamentalism is the buildup of sweeping police state powers that will be directed not merely at Islamic radicals, but at any opposition to the French bourgeoisie, above all that from the working class.

Valls promised that within three months his government will have drafted new laws on expanded phone-tapping and Internet surveillance, as well as measures to restructure the French educational system and change the country's housing policy (aimed at breaking up Muslim communities in impoverished suburbs around major cities).

Given that France is home to some five million Muslims—the largest Muslim population in Western Europe—these measures are not only anti-democratic and provocative, they are also extremely reckless.

Supporters of the propaganda offensive of the French bourgeoisie proclaim that all criticism of the vile provocations of *Charlie Hebdo* is an attack on “free speech,” and that somehow the mobilization of the resources of the French state to promote the magazine is a defense of democratic rights.

It is one thing to defend the legal right to publish a vicious, racist, right-wing magazine. Marxists oppose the banning even of outright fascist publications by the bourgeois state, because any laws used against the extreme right will be used far more violently against the working class and the left.

It is a far different matter to cover up for, and even glorify, the repulsive political messages of such publications. There is no difference in principle between cartoons distorting and degrading the prophet Muhammad and the anti-black caricatures of the Ku Klux Klan or, for that matter, the anti-Semitic caricatures long popular in the neo-fascist and neo-Nazi camp. This is demonstrated by the logic of French politics, as President Hollande combines solidarity with the anti-Muslim caricatures of *Charlie Hebdo* with an invitation to Marine Le Pen, leader of the fascist National Front, to a meeting at the Elysée Palace.

The relentless pollution of public opinion and the distortion and misdirection of the natural anger and shock over the Paris massacre reveal the ideological bankruptcy of the French bourgeoisie and of imperialism as a whole. American imperialism justified its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by waving the bloody shirt of 9/11, a pretext that is now completely

exhausted.

As they plot new military adventures, assuming the dimensions of a veritable new Crusade, the ruling classes in France and internationally are playing the race card. Inexorably, however, the fundamental class contradictions in all the major capitalist countries will make themselves felt.

The working class must shake off the stultifying effects of the media propaganda barrage and take up the struggle for its independent class interests—the defense of jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and the fight against imperialist war.



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