

Employers push to use French state of emergency against workers

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The public statements of French employers federations, calling for using the powers granted by the state of emergency imposed after the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris to monitor and repress workers, constitute a sharp warning to the working class. The draconian powers the state is granting itself, supposedly in order to struggle against Islamist terrorist organizations, are in fact aimed squarely at the working class.

The vice president of the Medef (French employers federation), Geoffrey Roux de Bézieux, proposed yesterday to establish close coordination between business owners and intelligence services to pick out any workers with suspect ideas or behavior.

If “someone has radical behavior, the duty of the CEO, as of any citizen, is to point out this behavior to the police. ... We have recommended to our member companies to be vigilant about radicalist excesses in the workplaces,” he said.

This remark underscores that the extraordinary surveillance measures and repressive powers granted by the state of emergency are a direct threat to the working class.

Employers are terrified by the rising social anger against the Socialist Party (PS) government’s austerity measures. They were horrified by the recent confrontation between Air France workers and the executives and union bosses who were preparing mass layoffs. Workers across France supported the employees who denounced company policy and tore the shirts of two top managers. The ruling class aims to use the police state that is now under construction in France, under cover of a so-called struggle against terror, to repress such working class opposition.

De Bézieux indicated that bosses could, for example, impose Islamophobic measures in workplaces, such as

an outright ban on women wearing Islamic veils. According to de Bézieux, “We are still in shock from the attacks and unable to commit to anything definite on this subject, but in any case, it is definitely up for discussion.”

Such a decision, which would effectively allow employers to prevent their workers from practicing the Islamic faith, would be a drastic, racist attack on workers’ freedom of conscience. The fact that a high ranking representative of French business would propose such a ban underscores that social tensions are reaching a degree of intensity that is no longer compatible with the exercise of fundamental democratic rights.

The state of emergency nonetheless would then grant each boss who had banned the veil at his company to denounce to the police any workers who criticized this decision.

According to the PS’ bill inscribing the state of emergency in the constitution, police could then detain the worker, search his home and seize its content, and subject him to house arrest—even if he was opposed to terrorism—as long as the policeman decided that his remarks gave “reason to believe that his behavior will constitute a danger for security and public order.”

It would be false and dangerous to believe, moreover, that only workers of Muslim faith are targeted by the police-state measures being prepared by the PS. The entire working class is threatened by the permanent state of emergency that the PS wants to impose in France.

The constitutional amendment proposed by the PS makes no reference to terrorism or Islam. It would give enormous powers to the security forces to repress any worker who did something the police could interpret as disturbing the peace. Even a comment suggesting that a

worker could support or welcome an action that police would oppose as contrary to public order—engaging in a wildcat strike, attending a pro-Palestinian demonstration, or sequestering a manager—could be enough to justify his detention and house arrest.

The PS is particularly anxious to give itself the tools to suppress working class opposition now, because it is working closely with the bosses and the union bureaucracies to prepare deep attacks on workers' social rights that will provoke enormous social anger. By proposing to rule France through a state of emergency of indefinite length, Hollande wants to allow police to mobilize draconian powers to suppress this anger and opposition.

Already, at the beginning of November, Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced that the Labor Code would be subordinated by an upcoming reform to company-level agreements negotiated between unions and company management. After three years of PS austerity has undermined workers' living standards, the government wants to allow companies to flagrantly disregard the contents of the Labor Code.

One point that Valls did not put in question at the time, however, is France's main labor contract, the Indeterminate-Duration Contract (CDI). The CDI, under which most French workers are still employed, and which gives rather strong protections against layoffs compared to contracts in most European or North American countries, is now being targeted for destruction by the bosses. By attacking the CDI, the ruling class wants to create conditions to impose mass layoffs in line with the evolution of the global economic climate.

"The framework of the CDI is no longer compatible with the needs of our economy," declared Gerald Karsenti, CEO of Hewlett-Packard France, this week. "When one hires someone here, one does not have the flexibility one has elsewhere to cut staffing levels as required by the state of the economy."

"Modifying the labor contract is crucial to encourage job creation, in an environment where the difficulty one has firing workers is a key brake on the creation of jobs," declared the Group of Service Professions (GPS).

"Can one still work in the same company one's entire life? Obviously not!" declared Christian Nibourel of the consulting firm Accenture, who is the president of

the GPS.

The defense of workers' basic social rights requires opposition to the state of emergency, which bans any demonstration or workers' mobilization, as the bourgeoisie prepares this reactionary offensive against the working class.



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