

Canada: Right seeks to whip up backlash against refugees

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A right-wing, fear-mongering campaign has been whipped up in Canada by much of the political establishment and media in the 10 days since the Paris terrorist attacks.

Claiming that Syrian refugees constitute a “security threat,” the Conservatives and other right-wing forces are demanding the new Liberal government abandon its pledge to settle 25,000 Syrian refugees in the country by the end of 2015. Many have baldly declared that “Harper was right,” a reference to the former Conservative Prime Minister who callously resisted demands to take in more than a trickle of refugees and put in place mechanisms to effectively prohibit Syrian Muslims from finding refuge in Canada.

The latest attempt to whip up an anti-refugee backlash has included open Islamophobic appeals and has helped fuel a wave of attacks and threats against Canada’s Muslims.

Despite claiming to be a “progressive” government committed to assisting refugees, the Liberals have already capitulated to this right-wing campaign. According to CBC, the government’s Syrian refugee plan, due to be announced today, will ban single men asylum seekers. Only women and children and married men accompanied by their families will be allowed to settle in Canada. Government sources who spoke to the CBC said that security concerns are the reason for the discriminatory ban.

The figure of 25,000 refugees is a drop in the bucket in the face of the millions displaced by over a decade of imperialist- led and fomented wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. The figure was announced by the Liberals in mid-election campaign in response to a massive outpouring of public sympathy for the refugees and anger at the Harper government’s inaction and indifference.

Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, who has emerged as a leading spokesman for the Conservatives since the October 19 federal election, issued an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on November 16 in which he invoked the Paris terrorist attack to demand the government abandon its December 31 target and called for even more extensive security checks of anyone seeking to enter Canada as a Syrian refugee.

Wall’s appeal, which he has since repeated in various forums, is an outrageous slur against the hundreds of thousands who have fled the wars triggered by the imperialist powers in the Middle East.

In Quebec City, where Mayor Regis Lebaume, a notorious right-winger, has publicly said that he would favor accepting only Syrian orphans, an online petition is now circulating to demand the government “suspend” the plan to take in 25,000 refugees by Dec. 31 for “reasons of national security.” “If we move fast [i.e., resettle refugees expeditiously],” says the petition’s sponsor “...jihadists will most likely sneak in.”

With the media and politicians giving credence to the spurious claims that terrorists are intent on using the refugee process to infiltrate Canada, the petition has garnered 50,000 signatures. (A counter-petition, welcoming Syrian refugees to Quebec, has likewise received thousands of signatures.)

The anti-refugee propaganda goes hand-in-hand with demands that Canada step up its involvement in the US war in Syria and Iraq. Ostensibly aimed against the Islamic State, this war is a continuation of the previous wars Washington has waged in the Middle East and has as its ultimate objective toppling the Assad regime in Damascus so as to shore up US hegemony over the world’s most important oil exporting region.

The same right-wing forces that are attacking the Trudeau government over the refugee issue are also accusing it of “abandoning” Canada’s allies because it plans to withdraw the six Canadian fighter jets that are bombing Iraq and Syria. In fact, Trudeau has pledged to vastly expand the Canadian armed forces’ training mission in Iraq and otherwise deepen Canada’s economic and security cooperation with US imperialism.

The vicious anti-refugee campaign follows on from the hard right campaign the Conservatives mounted for the October 19 federal election. Under the guise of combatting “barbaric cultural practices,” the Conservatives sought to ban the wearing of the niqab in citizenship ceremonies and promoted the idea that Muslims represent a threat to

Canadians' "way of life." This was part of their broader attempt to portray Canada as under attack from jihadi terrorists, so as to justify aggressive wars abroad and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home.

In Quebec, the pro-Quebec independence Parti Quebecois (PQ) has joined the Conservatives in raising a furor over the "security" issues raised by refugee resettlement. This is in keeping with the chauvinist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim appeals the PQ has been making for the better part of the last decade in the name of upholding "Quebec values."

Speaking at a Quebec Liberal conference the weekend after the Paris attacks, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard attacked the PQ as "xenophobic" and sought to promote his own party, which is in the process of imposing savage austerity measures, as the defender of humanitarian values and "open and shared citizenship."

Couillard denounced a proposal of prominent PQ legislator Jean-Francois Lisée to delay giving new Canadian citizens the right to vote in Quebec, as well as the suggestion made by the right-wing populist CAQ (Coalition for Quebec's Future) that immigrants be deported if they fail to pass a French-language and "Quebec values" test after living three years in Quebec.

Couillard's pose as a defender of the rights of refugees and immigrants is a sham. His own government has brought forward chauvinist legislation to ban Muslim women wearing face coverings from accessing public services, including education and health care. Couillard is also an outspoken proponent of Canada's military intervention in the Middle East, which has helped create the catastrophe from which millions of refugees are now fleeing.

The whipping up of anti-Muslim bigotry has intensified internationally in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the November 13 events in Paris. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the campaign to vilify Muslims serves definite political ends. Anti-Muslim hysteria provides a justification for imperialist interventions abroad as well as a wedge with which to attack democratic rights at home. In the climate of such fear-mongering, policies can be pursued that would otherwise provoke widespread and immediate opposition. And, as with all such campaigns against racial and religious minorities in the last century, murderous and fascistic elements are mobilized that, in a crisis, can be unleashed against the working class as a whole.

Such reactionary elements are coming to the fore in response to the hysteria being whipped up in Canada. On the evening of Saturday, November 14, a mosque in Peterborough, Ontario, was set ablaze by an arsonist in what police say was a hate-crime, leaving the local Muslim community shaken and afraid.

On Monday, November 16, in broad daylight, a woman

walking to collect her child from school was savagely attacked and beaten by two men in the Eglinton/Don Mills area of Toronto. The woman is reported to now be afraid to leave her home.

In Montreal an online threat was made the same day against mosques. The next day a video surfaced which threatened Arabs and Muslims across Quebec. It depicted a masked man with a gun threatening to kill one Muslim or Arab per week. Police subsequently reported that they have arrested a man in connection with the video.

Also last week, two women wearing hijabs were attacked by three men, who denounced them as "terrorists" on a Toronto subway platform at the evening rush hour. One woman was pushed toward an incoming train, but a quick thinking commuter activated an emergency alarm and the men fled.

Threats are also being directed to the large numbers of Canadians ready to welcome and assist refugees on their arrival. François Deschamps, the initiator of the Facebook page "Refugees Welcome," has reported that he and other members of the Facebook group have received scores of threatening messages. One of the reasons he launched the page, Deschamps said, was to combat false information being circulated on social media. "False statistics are mixed with false stories about the type of refugees who will come here."

Leaders at a mosque in Thorncliffe Park/Flemmingdon Park, a working class Toronto neighbourhood, have reacted by warning women not to leave home alone, to walk in pairs and not to jay walk for fear someone might take the opportunity to deliberately run them down. A large rally was held in the neighbourhood on November 20 to denounce the Islamophobic attacks and show solidarity with Toronto's Muslims.



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