

French state sues mayor for linking police repression to pro-Nazi Vichy regime

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French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin is suing the Green mayor of Colombes, Patrick Chaimovitch, for having raised the historical links between the collaborationist Vichy regime and the French police. This outrageous decision, demanded by far-right police unions, tramples underfoot historical truth and basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression. It virtually outlaws historically-informed criticism of the police and of fascism in France.

On July 19, commemorating the anniversary of Vichy police's Vel d'Hiv round-up of 13,000 Jews in Paris in 1942, Chaimovitch denounced far-right and anti-immigrant politics in Europe. He said: "French police and gendarmes who obeyed orders from their superiors to set into motion the Vel d'Hiv round-up, as well as further round-ups of Jews elsewhere later, are the ancestors of those who, today, with the same zeal, hunt down migrants, undocumented workers, those denied their human rights, living beings trying to survive in want."

Speaking on this round-up, which initiated the mass deportations of over 75,000 Jews from France to death camps in Germany and Poland, Chaimovitch stressed its contemporary significance: "I am convinced that the driving forces that allowed the Vel d'Hiv round-up to occur 78 years ago are still at work in our contemporary societies, in France and beyond."

The mayor of this Paris-area municipality also criticized France's 2005 law criminalizing assistance to undocumented refugees: "Colombes, at the request of the national state, will greet 60 of them in the coming days. Our municipality will bring them all possible assistance in line with indications we will receive from the city. We should recall that the Parliament recently turned solidarity into a crime, though without using those words."

Far-right police unions and the Macron government both bitterly attacked Chaimovitch, claiming he simply equated the Vichy police with the police forces of the current regime. On Sunday, Interior Minister Darmanin wrote on Twitter: "If it is confirmed that these scandalous and intolerable comments about the police and gendarmerie of the Republic

were made, I will sue the mayor of Colombes for comparing the security forces to the Vichy police."

The Alliance-Police union, which is close to the neo-fascist party of Marine Le Pen, denounced Chaimovitch: "Shame on you, Mayor Chaimovitch, for having made such appalling remarks." The union said it was "satisfied with the position of the Interior Minister, who is considering a lawsuit against the scandalous and undignified comments of this elected official."

The Synergy-Officers Union declared on Twitter: "We are deeply disgusted by hearing the remarks of this official. These people mix up everything and compare that which cannot be compared to justify their crimes. For shame, it insults the memory of the Vel d'Hiv."

Finally, on Monday night, Darmanin wrote on Twitter: "Today, I filed suit with the state prosecutor in Nanterre against the mayor of Colombes for publicly insulting the national police and the national gendarmerie."

This reactionary campaign against Chaimovitch is based on provocations and lies. The mayor did not claim that the current police forces are exactly the same as those of the Nazi-collaborationist regime that ruled France during World War II. Rather, he pointed to the historical continuity between the Vichy regime's paramilitary units and France's post-war security forces, in order to stress the growing danger of dictatorship today.

Undeniable historical facts support Chaimovitch's statements. The Vichy police's Special Brigades, also attached to the General Intelligence (RG) agency, largely directed repression of the communist resistance and of the Jews. After the war, many of these brigades' members rejoined the police or the RG domestic intelligence agency. However, ten of their leaders, including the anti-Semitic and anti-Communist torturer Fernand David, were shot for treason at the Liberation.

The Vichy regime's Mobile Reserve Groups (GMR), paramilitary units counting 20,000 men who helped Nazi SS units repress armed uprisings in France, were re-branded after the war as the Republican Security Companies (CRS).

The CRS have since been tasked with repressing workers' protests. Their Vichyite origins inspired the famous slogan "CRS-SS" during the deadly repression of the 1947–1948 French miners strikes, a slogan still used today.

Affluent and complacent petty-bourgeois like the ex-1968 student leader Alain Krivine of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) try to divide the police between ex-fascists and "real democrats." After the NPA's foundation in 2009, Krivine criticized Maurice Papon but hailed Maurice Grimaud, who led police repression in Paris during the May 1968 general strike, as a "good guy" and "left-wing democrat." Basing themselves on this extremely shaky division, cops, bankers and the bourgeois press salute the police and express outrage any time there is serious discussion of Vichy.

In fact, Chaimovitch is correct to warn that the same conditions that drove the emergence of fascism in the 20th century are still at work today. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and expanding social misery from the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, and amid growing US war threats against China, the financial aristocracy in France and across Europe is legitimizing far-right politics and building police-state regimes.

It is not Chaimovitch but Macron who raised the actuality of Vichy, appealing to the far right as he launched the CRS against the "yellow vests" in 2018 by claiming that Pétain was a "great soldier." What followed is a matter of record. The largest wave of police repression in mainland France since Vichy led to more than 10,000 arrests, 4,000 protesters wounded, dozens of eyes lost, and the death of an elderly woman shot by a tear gas canister. Macron then gave a medal to CRS officer Bruno Félix, who commanded the unit that fired the canister that killed Zineb Redouane.

Chaimovitch's warning is appropriate due not only to the French but also the international situation. The European Union (EU), which has built a network of nightmarish detention camps for tens of thousands of migrants in the decade since NATO launched wars in Libya and Syria, is legitimizing everywhere the fascist heritage of European capitalism. Chancellor Angela Merkel's government in Germany is protecting the right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski who proclaimed that Hitler was "not vicious."

Above all, the drive towards military dictatorship in the United States has become ever more overt since the pandemic began. The police murder of George Floyd and the social anger provoked by official mismanagement of the pandemic triggered an unprecedented wave of protests across the entire country and internationally. Trump reacted by demanding the dispatch of federal armed forces against the American people and by authorizing paramilitary forces to terrorize, assault and kidnap protesters.

Under these conditions, the French state is now attempting to effectively outlaw the expression of historically-informed, left-wing opposition to police dictatorship and fascism.

It is critical today to uncompromisingly defend historical truth and oppose police-state authoritarianism. It appears Chaimovitch—whose party is deeply linked to parties of the police state apparatus like the big-business Socialist Party—is backpedaling in response to the reactionary threats of Darmanin and the police unions. Shortly before Darmanin announced the lawsuit against him, Chaimovitch published a press release hailing the police.

He wrote, "Of course, for me there is no possible comparison between the police and gendarmerie of a democratic state on the one part, and the police and gendarmerie of Pétain's regime. I regret that my comments may have caused confusion. ... I would like to recall my support for policemen and gendarmes who carry the heavy democratic responsibility to ensure security under extremely difficult conditions."

There is no airtight barrier, however, separating a "democratic" capitalist state from a fascist state. It must be recalled that it was the French National Assembly that, on July 10, 1940, voted to give dictatorial powers to Pétain.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), campaigned among workers for an active boycott of the second round of the 2017 presidential elections between Macron and Le Pen.

It rejected arguments that Macron was more democratic than Le Pen. The PES warned that the decisive question was the struggle to arm the working class politically for an independent struggle against the authoritarian policy that the winner, whether Macron or Le Pen, would inevitably carry out after the election. Macron's evolution, starting with his "Republican salute" to Le Pen and her voters on election night, has vindicated the assessment of the PES.

For these reasons, the PES calls for opposition to the attempts by Macron and Darmanin, by attacking Chaimovitch, to protect the police state and create a reactionary political climate in which all reference to workers' struggles against fascism is treated as thought crime.



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