

Quebec to appeal acquittal of fascist, but only on lesser charges

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Quebec's provincial prosecutor, known by the French acronym DPCP (*Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales*), will appeal the recent acquittal of neo-Nazi leader Raphaël Lévesque on two lesser charges of mischief and break-in, but not on the more significant charges of criminal intimidation and harassment.

On May 23, 2018, Lévesque and six other members of Atalante, a far-right anti-immigration group, barged into the Montreal offices of the media outlet *Vice Quebec*. Except for Lévesque, the men wore masks bearing the *fleur de lys* (the national symbol of Quebec). They delivered a "2018 trash media" award to journalist Simon Coutu, throwing clown noses and leaflets around the premises. According to the prosecutor and several witnesses, the leaflets depicted blood dripping from the word "Vice."

The fascist mob that invaded the *Vice* editorial office denounced Coutu for inciting "a war," because he wrote a series of articles detailing repeated clashes in the streets of Montreal and Quebec City between Atalante (and other far-right groups) and so-called "Antifas" (anti-fascist activists.)

On June 10, Quebec Court Judge Joëlle Roy acquitted Lévesque of all charges against him. In a politically-biased ruling, she reached the incredible conclusion "that no criminal act had been committed." The actions of Lévesque were found to be "justified and legitimate" since he had come "to deliver a message and communicate information" without "an intent to threaten or intimidate."

Lévesque and Atalante are portrayed in the ruling as the targets of an unfair investigation by an over-aggressive journalist. The judge accepted the testimony of the defendant as fact, while dismissing and ridiculing that of the victim and his colleagues, in which they said they felt threatened by Lévesque and his "six goons."

Lévesque's acquittal was based on the claim he did not have any criminal intent. The judge drew this conclusion from Lévesque's testimony and what she called the "overarching context." But this "context" was reduced to the May 23, 2018 event and focused on its most superficial aspects—Lévesque's choice of non-threatening words, his

polite tone (described as sarcastic by a witness), his smiling face, and the flowers in his hands (that were used to trick the receptionist into letting him enter the premises while his six partners in crime were hiding in a corner).

Key elements were ignored. Lévesque is a notorious neo-Nazi, the founder and lead singer of the music group *Légitime violence* (Violence is legit). Under the name of Raf Stomper, he has performed songs advocating the assassination of "leftists" and the extermination of Jews. He later founded Atalante as an ultra-nationalist and anti-immigration organization, training its members in a boxing club to "defend our ideas on the ground." Atalante's logo is inspired by that of the Nazi SS.

While these elements are relevant to a trial for criminal intimidation and part of the "overarching context," they were suppressed by Judge Roy. She prevented the prosecutor from presenting Lévesque's politics of hate as evidence or even referring to the activities of the far-right Atalante or the resemblance between its logo and that of the SS.

The judge excluded from the "overarching context" the testimonies of the victims, some of whom had to take time off work or reported having suffered from panic attacks in the days following the events of May 23, 2018.

The ruling trivializes the violent acts of a far-right group by treating its attempt to intimidate a journalist as a mere "humorous message."

As the WSWs wrote in an earlier article, the acquittal of Lévesque is part of a shift in the ruling establishment towards the promotion of anti-Muslim chauvinism and xenophobia, and the consequent legitimization of far-right forces.

"In Quebec, throughout Canada, and around the world," we wrote, "the capitalist ruling elite is embracing reaction and cultivating the extreme right as a weapon against the working class" under conditions of "immense social tensions generated by social inequality and exacerbated by ... the COVID-19 pandemic."

The prosecutor's office chose not to challenge Judge Roy's hostile behavior during the trial and her manifest

legal errors on the charges of criminal intimidation and harassment. It will refrain from raising before a higher court the danger to democratic rights posed by a ruling that gives the green light to provocative and violent acts by far-right forces.

Media coverage was characterized by a concerted effort to conceal what was at stake in the case. The press reports that appeared were generally sympathetic to the defendant and did not cast doubt on the merits of the acquittal, apart from a handful of comments that raised concerns over the freedom of the press.

The mainstream media downplayed Lévesque's neo-Nazi past and Atalante's calls for "remigration," i.e., the forced deportation of immigrants to their countries of origin. They concealed the connection between the court ruling and the rise of far-right groups in Quebec, and ignored the international context of the case.

Faced with an unprecedented global crisis of the capitalist system, political figures and parties around the world are adopting far-right and fascistic rhetoric and policies aimed at mobilizing the most reactionary forces in society against the growing opposition of workers and youth to capitalist austerity and war.

In the United States, billionaire President Trump is working to build an extra-parliamentary movement based on militarism, xenophobia, and law-and-order attacks on democratic rights. In response to the mass multiracial protests after the police murder of George Floyd, Trump threatened to deploy the military to US cities in violation of the constitution. Federal agents were later sent to Portland, Oregon where they roamed the streets without identification badges, shoving protesters into unmarked vans. The Trump administration has also deployed federal paramilitary forces to several other major American cities.

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro is an avowed fascist who has declared his admiration for the military dictatorship that tortured thousands of Brazilians between 1964 and 1985. He threatened to use the army to suppress demonstrations that were part of the global solidarity movement with the US protests over Floyd's murder and police violence.

In Germany, in order to impose its militarist, anti-immigrant and anti-worker policies in the face of growing working class opposition, the Grand Coalition government is relying on far-right forces such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and protecting the networks of neo-Nazis that infest the army, the police and the intelligence services.

Far right forces are also geminating within Canada's military, as underscored by last month's attempted assassination of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau by Canadian Army Reservist Corey Hurren. Hurren, who posted his

support for the violent, right-wing extremist "QAnon" movement, was detained on the grounds of Rideau Hall with a large arsenal of weaponry in early July. The ultra-right views of the assailant have been downplayed by the mainstream media, which has failed to ask the most basic questions. Were military leaders, who have in the past feigned concern about the spread of racist views within the ranks, aware of Hurren's views? Did Hurren share them with his fellow Rangers and other members of the Canadian Armed Forces?

In Quebec, the ruling establishment has been promoting chauvinism for more than a decade, with a campaign that depicts immigrants and religious minorities as a threat to "Quebec values." This was intensified with the election of the right-wing populist, "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) in October 2018. Among the CAQ government's first actions was to pass legislation reducing Quebec's annual intake of immigrants, banning the wearing of religious symbols by teachers, and barring Muslim women wearing a face-covering veil (the burqa or niqab) from receiving public services, including health care and education.

It is this universal turn by the ruling elite towards xenophobia that is encouraging far-right nationalist forces, such as Atalante and La Meute, to increase their public demonstrations and carry out acts of provocation.

The prosecutor's decision not to appeal the acquittal of a right-wing extremist on the charges of harassment and intimidation of a journalist has serious implications. It is another sign that under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and the resurgence of working class opposition, the ruling elite is turning its back on traditional democratic norms and extending its hand to far-right forces.



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