

France’s “anti-separatist” law: A frontal assault on democratic rights

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The “anti-separatist” law now set to pass in the French National Assembly effects a drastic, authoritarian shift in France’s political regime. Its 51 articles tear apart democratic rights established for over a century.

Coming just weeks after Donald Trump’s attempted coup in Washington, the frontal assault on democratic rights in France must be taken as a warning by workers internationally. Confronting growing popular opposition to capitalism and anger among workers and youth over a murderous health policy that has led to two million deaths from COVID-19, the financial aristocracy is moving towards dictatorship.

The government of French President Emmanuel Macron presents its law as a weapon to eradicate “separatist” support for Islamism and terrorism and to compel loyalty to the state and its right-wing bans on Muslim headscarves. Rewriting—in fact, tearing apart—the 1905 secularism law that established the separation of church and state, the “anti-separatist law” grants the state vast control over the organization and funding of religious institutions and arbitrary powers to close houses of worship. Across France, nine mosques have already been closed and 76 are threatened with closure.

Using this threat, Macron has already imposed on the French Muslim Council a humiliating new charter, compelling Muslims to obey “national cohesion” and “public order.” This effectively establishes Muslims as a separate category of citizens subject to a loyalty oath. It is impossible not to recall that in the 20th century, fascist regimes incited anti-Semitic hatreds to divide the working class and impose murderous policies.

It would be wrong, moreover, to view this law as an attack on the rights solely of Muslims or other believers. Article 8 imposes the fascist principle that

associations—that is, organizations such as charities, community groups and political parties, created under the terms of a 1901 law—are collectively responsible for the actions of each of their individual members.

This paves the way for arbitrary bans on cultural and political organizations. Police could cite any infraction committed by a member of an association to declare the entire association to be criminal, ban it and potentially prosecute its members. It is an attack on the entire working class.

As is the case throughout Europe and internationally, the ruling class is cultivating outright fascist forces. Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, 38, who oversaw the drafting of the law, makes no secret of his fascistic sympathies. Asked whether the law could be used to ban parties, Darmanin replied that he would not prosecute the far-right *Action française* (AF) party, even though it seeks to overthrow the Republic and replace it with an absolute monarchy, as before the 1789 French Revolution. AF members later confirmed that Darmanin was active in their party in 2008, later joining The Republicans and then Macron’s party.

The 1901 and 1905 laws now targeted by Macron were established in a struggle against the *Action française*—the most ruthless intellectual proponents of political anti-Semitism, monarchism and ultimately anti-communism and fascism in France.

The *Action française* was founded in 1898 to keep Jewish officer Captain Alfred Dreyfus in jail after his wrongful 1894 conviction on false espionage charges by the Army, backed by the Church. The socialist movement, led by Jean Jaurès, played the leading role in the struggle that established Dreyfus’s innocence. The *Action française*’s devastating defeat in the Dreyfus Affair prepared the passage of the 1901 and 1905 laws, guaranteeing freedom of association and

freedom of religion.

During World War II, the *Action française* was the political base of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime. *Action française* leader Charles Maurras hailed the coming to power of collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain in 1940 as a “divine surprise.” After the war, when Pétain and Maurras were convicted of treason, Maurras bitterly remarked that it was “the revenge of Dreyfus.”

With the “anti-separatist” law, the Macron administration is fashioning the revenge of Maurras. It has repudiated its pretenses during the 2017 elections—that Macron was a “democratic” alternative to neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen.

In 2018, amid mass “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, Macron hailed Pétain as a “great soldier.” Now, rejecting mass public sentiment and calls from the medical community for a shelter-at-home order on COVID-19, it pursues a far-right line. Last week, in a prime time TV debate, Darmanin attacked Le Pen from the right as “soft” on Islam, telling her to take “vitamins.”

The turn toward authoritarianism is bound up with the homicidal policy of the ruling class in response to the coronavirus pandemic. As the WSWS has explained, the COVID-19 pandemic is a trigger event in world history. To implement its homicidal policy, the ruling class internationally is cultivating fascist forces and turning to authoritarian forms of rule.

Across Europe, similar processes are underway. In Spain, the Army reacted to strikes last year that forced the adoption of a lockdown policy by plotting coups and rehabilitating 1936 fascist coup leader and dictator Francisco Franco. In Italy, banker Mario Draghi is forming a “herd immunity” government, including both the far-right Lega and the ex-Stalinist Democratic Party. And the German bourgeoisie is escalating its calls for rearmament and campaigns to rehabilitate the Nazis.

The force that historically was mobilized against fascism, and that today must be mobilized again, is the international working class, fighting on a socialist program. Overcoming fascist attacks on fundamental democratic rights, driven by the profit interests of the banks, requires building a movement to transfer power to the working class. Such a struggle cannot be left in the hands of the trade union bureaucracies and their

reactionary political allies.

In France, the pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class, which tacitly supported Macron in 2017, have backed Macron’s “herd immunity” policy and the “anti-separatist” law. The Stalinist French Communist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, which initially called the law “useless and dangerous” and a “mess of amalgams” against Muslims, are now voting for the law’s articles in parliament. Tied to Macron and financed by European Union pandemic bailouts, they are moving sharply to the right.

The Macron administration’s record has vindicated the assessment made by the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste*, the ICFI’s French section, in the 2017 elections. Faced with a second round between Macron and Le Pen, it called for an active boycott of the elections, stressing that Macron was no alternative to Le Pen and that a politically independent movement would have to be built in the working class against whichever candidate won.

Against “herd immunity” and fascist policies, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* fights to renew in the working class its great traditions of socialist struggle.



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