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## Manipulation in Paris: Racism, Islamophobia and the capitalist crisis in Europe

Horace G. Campbell

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Whether with the jihadists in Libya, working on both sides of the dirty war in Algeria, manipulating the Tuareg in Mali, or working with the Saudis, the French intelligence and security have worked closely with branches of US intelligence and military to keep the flames of war and insecurity burning. The recent mobilization over the Charlie Hebdo attack was meant to divert working people's attention from this complicity that is linked to the capitalist crisis.

'More than a million people joined over 40 presidents and prime ministers on the streets of Paris on Sunday in the most striking show of solidarity in the West against the threat of Islamic extremism since the Sept. 11 attacks. Responding to terrorist strikes that killed 17 people in France and riveted worldwide attention, Jews, Muslims, Christians, atheists and people of all races, ages and political stripes swarmed central Paris beneath a bright blue sky, calling for peace and an end to violent extremism.' – New York Times, Monday January 12, 2015.

This is how the mainstream papers in the West commented on the massive march in Paris on Sunday January 11 where millions rallied as a show of solidarity with the political leadership in France. The banner headline of the New York Times read, 'Huge Show of Solidarity in Paris against Terrorism.' The Los Angeles Times in its headline stated, 'France unites against terror: More than 1 million fill Paris streets to honor victims and say, 'We are not afraid!'' In the same

article, the French President Francois Hollande was reported to have declared, 'Paris is today the capital of the world.'

What is the meaning of this massive demonstration, allegedly in response to the killing of 17 persons in the week of January 5-10? In this commentary, this writer will join in the condemnation of the assault on Charlie Hebdo and the killing of journalists. It should be stated categorically here that this writer defends freedom of speech without endorsing the speech's content. Thus, I am unequivocally denouncing the killings in France. But the use of satire as camouflage for racist and offensive speech is unacceptable and should be equally denounced.

It is also urgent for progressive forces to work to ensure that the killings and mass mobilizations are not turned into vehicles for manipulating the working people to support racism, islamophobia and other forms of European jingoism and chauvinism. Even the mainstream media such as Reuters is now writing that 'Charlie Hebdo fallout: Specter of fascist past haunts European nationalism.' This spectre of fascism must be taken seriously because fascism emerges in the midst of a capitalist crisis when the ruling elements mobilize chauvinism and racism to divert the attention of the working people from mobilizing against the capitalist class. This was the concrete experience of fascism during the last major capitalist depression.

France, like the rest of Europe, has been gripped by a triple crisis – the banking crisis, the sovereign debt crisis and the future of the Euro as a viable international currency. These three crises spawned a fourth deadly issue, that of the political crisis and the question of the legitimacy for the current political and economic system. All over Europe governments instituted austerity measures to force working people to bear the cost of the recklessness of the bankers. Thus far, the austerity measures to save the banking system in Europe have failed to stabilize the system. Europe is now facing deflation and the deepening of the economic recession. Although the tiered and hieratical system in Europe with Germany, Austria and the Netherlands at the top had sought to present the Eurozone crisis as problems of the fiscal indiscipline of leaders in Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain, the French political leaders had hoped that its international tools of accumulation and plunder in Africa and Western Asia would save the capitalist system in France. Since 2008 the three top French banks Credit Agricole, BNP Paribas and Societe Generale were the most systemically risky financial entities in Europe. [1] Studies by European systemic risk index have warned of the over exposure of these banks and the need for billions of dollars of new funds to keep the French banking system solvent. French banks are over exposed in Greece.

In Greece and Spain there are massive popular social movements calling for a new social contract, new forms of politics and for an end to the austere measures to save the bankers. The French presidents Nicholas Sarkozy and Hollande have been jetting all around the world seeking to build alliances against the working people of France while supporting a climate of racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia and a climate of fear and insecurity. In this political environment, the far right political groups and parties have been the principal beneficiaries. The fringe and far right party called the National Front has emerged as the dominant force in French politics.

Internationally, France has become isolated after its duplicitous foreign policy by seeking to play

the Chinese against the USA, playing Russia against Germany, then working with Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey against the USA over the question of the Iran nuclear deal. The French were also at the forefront of working with the conservative forces in Saudi Arabia and Turkey to remove the Assad regime in Syria. These differing forms of manipulation ran into a dead end as the social and economic crisis of European society was coming to the forefront of the consciousness of French citizens.

It is in moments such as these when passions and emotions are being exploited by the media to promote fear and a climate of insecurity where progressive journalists and investigative reporters are needed to fully investigate the varying forces at play in the newly declared war on radical Islam. There must be international mobilization to expose the real forces behind the killing of the journalists and vigilance to ensure that this manipulation does not reproduce the religious fanaticism that is being stoked by the neo-conservative forces in North America, Europe and West Asia. There must be the raising of the political consciousness of the youth to oppose racism and religious extremism so that they are not manipulated like the Kouachi brothers. There must also be a mobilization for an alternative to this system that props up bankers at the expense of working peoples in all parts of the world. The fight for free speech, freedom of assembly, social justice and economic freedom should not be reserved for one section of humanity.

#### CONTEXT: THE NATIONAL FRONT AND DOMINANCE IN FRENCH POLITICS

Since the massive financial crisis of 2008, the European working peoples have faced austerity at the hands of political leaders. In France, the electorate voted to bring in the Socialist party led by Francois Hollande in May 2012 to end the rule of Nicholas Sarkozy who had ruled on behalf of the rich. According to the media Francois Hollande won power in France in order to turn the tide on a rightwards and xenophobic lurch in European politics. During the election campaign Hollande had vowed to transform Europe's handling of the economic crisis by fighting back against German-led austerity measures. These vows disappeared as soon as Hollande took office and the "Socialist" pursued the same imperial and harsh policies of the Sarkozy conservative forces.

Instead of standing up to the bankers, Hollande instituted austerity measures. In the EU elections of 2014, the far right National Front that had been perceived as a fringe party in France emerged as the dominant party. The National Front led by Marine Le Pen has been campaigning on questions of crime, immigration and xenophobia and promoting Islamophobia. This was also an anti-Semitic force in the body politic of France.

This party was founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen who had been part of the scared social classes after the uprisings in Paris in 1968. Jean-Marie Le Pen had been in the military forces of France that had been humiliated by the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and was also part of the retreating force from Suez in 1956. Le Pen was an intelligence officer in the failed effort to derail the decolonization of Algeria. These experiences left an indelible mark on citizens such as Le Pen who yearned for France to return to its heyday as a colonial force in international politics. During the period when the global anti-apartheid movement was a political force all over the world, the National Front remained a fringe, peripheral and extreme movement in Europe. Le Pen was convicted several times of racism and incitement to racial hatred. In 1987,

he called the Nazi gas chambers "a detail in the history of World War II." The National Front was anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and racist. In 2011, the father handed over leadership to the daughter where the plan was to present a kinder and gentler face for authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing politics. In the face of the collapse of the base of the Socialist Party and the weakness of the Left forces in France, the National Front exploited the fears of the exploited French workers and in the EU election of May 2014 it emerged as the top political party.

The results delivered 25 percent of the votes for the National Front. It was the first time the National Front had overtaken all the traditional parties in an electoral contest, coming top with a quarter of the votes. The conservative and right wing opposition UMP that had been led by Nicholas Sarkozy won 20 percent, and the ruling Socialists were in third place with 14 percent. Political scientists and forecasters who have followed the ups and down of the French system had been predicting that Le Pen's far-right National Front party could win in that election but, the scale of the victory still came as a bombshell to the French press and political class. In Lisieux, the FN did not even field a candidate in the 2009 European elections, when the "extreme right" candidate polled just over 2 percent. This time around the FN scored 27.5 percent.

Newspaper reports indicated that in the next scheduled presidential elections in May 2017, Ms. Le Pen would emerge victorious in a run off. France had moved so far to the right that the leader of the Socialist Party became even more unpopular than Nicholas Sarkozy with about 13 per cent of the support of the voting population. After the FN entered the Senate for the first time in the fall 2014, there was real panic among the ruling elements that wanted to present France as a model of tolerance and openness. However, the real social and economic crisis could not be papered over.

#### WILL THE FRENCH BANKING SYSTEM SURVIVE?

In the deathbed competition between French and German capitalists, the Germans have been able to dominate the European Central Bank and to ensure that the Euro serves the interests of German bankers and industrialists. France had remained a junior partner of Germany and held jealously on to the reserves of 18 African states in order to sit at the table of European capitalists with some authority. When the financial crisis of global capital unfolded after 2007, the US was able to present a picture of recovery by maximizing the Exorbitant Privilege of the dollar and printing dollars under the bond buying scheme that was called Quantitative Easing. European bankers under the thumb of the German conservative forces were not as bold in advancing the same 'stimulus' measures to save the banks; hence the draconian austerity measures were unleashed against the workers of Europe. In societies such as Greece and Spain these measures created major problems when there were draconian cuts in public expenditures. Unemployment in Greece and Spain soared to over 25 percent as the austere neo-liberal policies were promoted by the European Union establishments (European Council, European Commission, and ECB) and by the International Monetary Fund. These three entities are referred to as the Troika.

French banks were over exposed in Greece and in June 2011 these banks had held \$93 billion in Greek debt. At the height of the NATO war to save the Euro in North Africa in 2011, President Nicolas Sarkozy had announced a debt rollover plan that had been agreed with French banks that could provide the framework for a larger, international plan aimed at giving the debt-ridden

banks some breathing space. This rollover plan was for three years and by the end of 2014, France had to look for new options, especially with the collapse of the government in Greece.

In 2013, the credit rating agency of Wall Street Standard & Poor posted a downgrade of France's triple-A rating. The top French banks which had been juggling between its subservience to Germany and its domination over African states were put on notice that global capital wanted more drastic measures against French workers. After the Standard and Poor notice, in a move to reassure Wall Street and increase their capital buffers, France's top three listed banks detailed major restructuring plans. BNP Paribas SA, Société Générale SA and Crédit Agricole SA announced a few thousands job cuts and plans to withdraw from several activities and parts of the world.

A study by JP Morgan found that the French bank Credit Agricole was the most exposed of Europe's commercial banks. This kind of pressure spooked speculators and drove the political leadership of France into intense global diplomacy to save the current form of French capitalism.

## THE DIPLOMACY OF SARKOZY AND HOLLANDE TO SAVE THE FRENCH BANKING SYSTEM

When the French initiated the war against the people of Libya in 2011, President Sarkozy had vowed, "We will fight to save the Euro." Sarkozy travelled to China promising China part of the spoils of the war while seeking Chinese investments in the failing French banks. Sarkozy made promises that he could not keep, seeking to build an alliance with the Chinese leadership against the United States. In the elections of 2012, Sarkozy was ousted because of his clear and overt rule on behalf of the super-rich in France.

Francois Hollande became the president of France in 2012 and continued the same austerity measures of Sarkozy at home while abroad intensified the duplicitous foreign policy. Where Sarkozy sought to present geo-political reasons for an alliance with Chinese capitalism, Hollande invoked the 'socialist' linkages between French and Chinese capital. During his first trip to Beijing Hollande promised to work with China to promote a new international 'multipolar' order. This was a clear effort at an alliance with China against the USA. Hollande forced the return of the looted cultural artifacts that had been stolen from China by French colonial forces in 1860. This reparative act was noted, but Hollande left China basically empty handed.

The Chinese as long term planners did not have the three year rollover hanging over their head and listened with politeness as Hollande made his entreaties. In the Middle East, the same Hollande worked with Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey to sabotage the Iran nuclear negotiations. Together with Israel and Saudi Arabia, France linked with the Jihadists who were to be later formalised as ISIS to create havoc in Syria. When in 2013 the US refused to insert ground troops in Syria to topple the Assad regime, France curried favor with the Saudis for a massive arms deal and sought to reassert its influence in the Levant (Lebanon, Turkey, Syria). It was the same France that had been at the forefront of opposing the full membership of Turkey in the European Union.

Hollande was incessantly traveling (to Britain, Brazil, Germany, Russia and all over Africa),

seeking answers short of nationalizing the banks and breaking from the Troika. In a state visit to the US in February 2014, Francois Hollande begged for support from the Obama Administration, citing the long alliance between France and the US since the American revolutionary war. France had been so busy that it had isolated itself and was now unsure of what its position was in the discussions with Washington. The displeasure and differences between the US and France were spelt out clearly in the press briefing of the NSC where the usual rhetoric on dealing with security challenges in Africa could not hide the deep rift between US imperialism and French opportunism.

The tensions between France and the US could not be papered over even after Hollande had travelled to Monticello (in Virginia) and the home of Thomas Jefferson to celebrate the history of the 'shared values of democracy.' After travelling to China, India, Brazil and South Africa proclaiming that France wanted to support a new multipolar world, when it came time for standing up to proclaim this new international situation, Francois Hollande groveled and repeated simplistic statements about partnership with the United States for international security. In his speech, Hollande had stated, 'A decade ago, few would have imagined our two countries working so closely together in so many ways. But in recent years our alliance has transformed. Since France's return to NATO's military command four years ago and consistent with our continuing commitment to strengthen the NATO-European Union partnership, we have expanded our cooperation across the board. We are sovereign and independent nations that make our decisions based on our respective national interests. Yet we have been able to take our alliance to a new level because our interests and values are so closely aligned.'

To compound the problems for the French banking system, the BNP Paribas bank had been fined \$10 billion for breaking sanctions. In the cutthroat competition between the oligarchs of finance, France's biggest listed bank had been placed under investigation by US authorities over whether it evaded US sanctions, mainly on Sudan, Iran and Syria, between 2002 and 2009. When the French bank was fined, Hollande made vigorous protests to Obama over the fine, appealing that it was disproportionate. A similar case against the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) in December 2013 resulted in the British banking group paying \$100m in fines.

## PANIC IN BERLIN AND PARIS

When the austerity measures in Greece forced a political crisis in December (2014) that led to the fall of the government and the call for new elections, there was panic all over Europe. Bankers and financiers feared that the election of a party that was not committed to austerity measures would weaken global capital in Europe. According to the Economist, 'with the Athens stock market falling by almost 5 percent in a single day, bank shares down by even more and Greek 10-year bond yields rising to a new 2014 high of 9.5 percent (over seven points above those for Italy). The reason for this collective outbreak of nerves is that the polls point to an election win for Syriza, the far-left populist party led by Alexis Tsipras. Although Mr. Tsipras says he wants to keep Greece in the euro, he also wants to dump most of the conditions attached to its bail-outs, ending austerity, reversing cuts in the minimum wage and in public spending, scrapping asset sales and seeking to repudiate much debt. Such a programme seems, to put it mildly, to sit uncomfortably with Greece's continuing membership of the single currency.'



The working people of Greece have felt the pain that workers and poor farmers have been feeling all over the global South. Unemployment has reached over 25 per cent and the incidents of suicides doubled. In a book published in 2013, 'The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills', by David Stuckler and Sanjay Basu, the authors chronicled the breakdown of social services in Greece and the incredible cost of austerity. When in December the Greek elections were called and the polls pointed to the possibility of the victory of a party that would not continue the policies of the Troika, there was panic in Berlin and Paris.

## FRANCE AND JIHADISTS

Since the colonial wars in Indo China and in Africa, the ruling classes in France depended on racism and jingoism to gain the support of French workers. In North Africa and in West Asia, France supported jihadists while proclaiming it was at the forefront of the war against terror. This manipulation was on full display in Mali and North Africa where France engineered the support of Tuareg rebels only to launch a military intervention to fight the same forces that it had mobilized and supported. Similarly, France and the Patraeus branch of the US intelligence took over Libya and recruited jihadists to fight in Syria while telling the world that France was opposed to terrorism. Two years later in March 2013, the Socialist government of Hollande supported Seleka rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR) to oust President Francois Bozize because France accused Bozize of granting favorable contracts to China and South Africa. Less than a year later, France was mobilizing the Security Council of the United Nations to fight the same Seleka rebels. These were the same elements that France had assisted in seizing state power in 2013.

It is this history of duplicity that renders the French version of the events of Paris of January 7 incredible. The authorities in France would have the world believe that after keeping the two brothers (Cherif and Said Kouachi) for over 10 years, the state ended the surveillance of the brothers six months before they allegedly attacked the Charlie Hebdo offices. Even more bizarre has been the report that Commissioner Helric Fredou killed himself on the night of the attack on Charlie Hebdo offices. Helric Fredou had been the deputy director of the regional police of Limoges since 2012 and would have been one of the senior police and intelligence officers who could have testified about the relationship between French security agencies and the two brothers. The alleged killers, Cherif and Said Kouachi, who were shot dead by police on January 9, spent their high school years in the Limoges region. Fredou had dispatched a team of police officials under his jurisdiction to interview the relatives of one of the Charlie Hebdo victims and had been debriefed about the interviews. It has been reported in varying media that immediately after the police debriefing, he began preparing his report, staying late at police headquarters to write it up. He was later found shot dead at 1 a.m. on Thursday morning, and the report he was writing was never found.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM THE HEIGHTENED INSECURITY AND SCAREMONGERING

The popularity of the far-right extremists in France and Europe has given comfort to the bankers that austerity could be covered up with racism. In the US, police killing of the poor, especially black and brown, had elicited a robust movement that was willing and ready to challenge white

racism in the streets. In France, the working classes are more divided and the stoking of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism has reached unprecedented heights. The Prime Minister took this tension to an even higher level on Saturday January 10 when he declared that France was at war with radical Islam. Islamophobia, austerity and divisions brought out the very same forces that are banning free speech in other parts of the world. Perhaps the most opportunistic of the leaders who gathered in France last Sunday was the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, who is himself facing reelection. The occupation of Palestine and the criminal war of Israel against unarmed citizens of Gaza had isolated the conservative Israelis in Europe with parliaments voting to recognize the Palestinian Authority. In the same week of the attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo, it was reported in the media that over 2000 innocent citizens were massacred in Baga, Nigeria, by elements of Boko Haram. The big rally in France had no words of solidarity for those massacred in Nigeria.

Two days after the killings at the Charle Hebdo's office there was the hostage situation at a kosher grocery. Here, the world was introduced to another individual who had been under surveillance by the French system for years. Ahmed Coulibaly, who allegedly seized control of the kosher grocery, was another 'terrorist' who had been under surveillance for years. Even after being under surveillance, and accused of consorting with terrorists, a few months before his arrest in 2010, Coulibaly met Nicolas Sarkozy at a conference about disenfranchised young people arranged at the Élysée Palace.

This is the same person that we are told was a dangerous terrorist. Coulibaly had been released from prison only in March 2014.

## VIGILANCE AND ORGANIZATION

This writer unequivocally condemns the killing of the journalists and other innocent civilians. This writer condemns racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. But condemnation is not enough. Progressives cannot sit idly by while religious warfare is being stoked to inflame the passions of young exploited and alienated working peoples. Those who have not accepted the massive propaganda war about saving freedom of expression are asking questions about why six months before the perpetrating such violence, the French security apparatus ended their surveillance of these three men. Why did the police commissioner who was most familiar with these three men commit suicide? Or did he commit suicide?

Whether it was with the jihadists in Libya, working on both sides of the dirty war in Algeria, manipulating the Tuareg in Mali, or working with the Saudis, the French intelligence and security have worked closely with branches of U.S. intelligence and military to keep the flames of war and insecurity burning. As the socialist blog noted,

'It is simply not credible that the three men were able to hatch and carry out an elaborate plan involving automatic weapons and explosives without the passive complicity, if not active involvement, of elements of the state apparatus. Even stranger is the apparent escape of Coulibaly's girlfriend, Hayat Boumeddiene, who is also wanted for questioning over the attacks. While the details remain unclear, she supposedly evaded all detection as she fled from France to Spain, where she caught a flight to Turkey, then crossed the border into Syria.'



The open and covert collaboration of intelligence and security agencies with Islamic extremist organizations has a long history. France is the most dogged in holding on to colonial territories (as in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Cayenne) and exploiting poor people. But, the crisis of the French banking system has created an unprecedented situation. In the last depression, France could transfer part of the costs of the crisis on to villages in Africa. Now, African independence movements are opposing French stranglehold over their resources while China is encroaching on traditional allies of France in places such as the Cameroon, Congo Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The pending elections in Greece and the heightened mobilization of workers and students in Spain open up the possibility for new forms of politics in Europe and isolating the far right and extreme racist forces. As the European project unravels the militarization of the society to fight terror can quickly be turned around to mobilize the troops against workers, students and farmers who oppose austerity measures. If we look at the experience of other western countries, the first choice of the political class is to transfer the cost of the crisis on to the shoulders of the working peoples. This has been the concrete experience of the US since 2008. The Euro is unravelling and the recent decision of the Swiss to abandon the Euro is one clear manifestation that the expedient of transferring the losses of the banks to Greek and Spanish workers cannot hold for long. France will either have to nationalize the banks and impose greater controls of the top one per cent or intensify the austerity measures of laying off government employees, cut pensions and cutting services in health, education, housing and sanitation. This path to save the risky banks will be to intensify repression. In this alternative, the present militarization and war on terrorists will be like a dress rehearsal for moving the military against students and workers.

Until that moment, mobilizing to win the support of those who now support the National Front further entrenches racism, xenophobia and intolerance. The manipulation in Paris should be seen as a pre-emptive move for deepening militarization. Progressives must oppose the rising fascist forces in Europe and neo-conservatism in the Americas.