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France's election at gunpoint

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The first round of the elections in France are being held against the backdrop of an attempt by the state and the media to use the violent incident on the Champs Elysées, involving a gunman who is alleged to have been acting on behalf of ISIS, to create an atmosphere of political hysteria.

With over 50,000 soldiers and policemen set to deploy to polling stations tomorrow, the elections are to be held at gunpoint.

As facts emerge about the background of the alleged gunman, it is virtually impossible not to conclude that this shooting was a provocation involving elements of the security forces, over half of whom plan to vote for Marine Le Pen's neo-fascist National Front (FN).

Karim Cheurfi, a French citizen and career criminal, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2003 for shooting and nearly killing two policemen but later released on appeal, was last arrested in February after demanding weapons and stating he wanted to kill policemen. He was released supposedly because the "level of danger" he posed was not at the priority level. Though he was an Islamic State (IS) sympathizer followed by French domestic intelligence at least since March, his case was treated as a common-law, not a terrorist case.

Despite France's strict gun control laws, Cheurfi was somehow able to amass an arsenal, including an automatic rifle, a shotgun and several knives, that he had with him during the attack.

The day before the shooting, right-wing media like *Le Figaro* demanded that Islamic terrorism be “at the center of the end of the election campaign. It is a critical issue, but one that has been too little dealt with.” The shooting was the signal for a coordinated political offensive. As security forces put much of downtown Paris on lockdown, the right-wing candidates speaking in Thursday night's presidential debate demanded stepped-up law-and-order policies and even a shutting down of the election campaign.

Conservative candidate François Fillon has demanded the eradication of “Islamist totalitarianism” and called for the “suspension” of the campaign, and Le Pen denounced the “incredible laxity of the courts” and demanded the expulsion of all foreigners with intelligence files. Fillon, Le Pen, and Emmanuel Macron—the candidate of the On the March movement, backed by France's Socialist Party (PS) government—all canceled their campaign events yesterday.

In a remarkable incident at the debate that points to the political atmosphere emerging in France, police confronted New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) candidate Philippe Poutou, who had appealed for police to be unarmed. They called him a “faggot” and said they would keep their weapons.

This attempt to shut down the campaign, and fill the airwaves with anti-Muslim propaganda is driven by a deep political crisis. The PS faces a historic collapse, after having been discredited by its austerity measures and its state of emergency, which suspends basic democratic rights. It is terrified by rising antiwar sentiment after unprovoked US strikes against Syria on April 7, which benefited Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Unsubmissive France movement. Macron, Le Pen, Fillon, and Mélenchon are now in a virtual tie, and over one-third of the voters are still undecided.

The ruling elite is well aware of explosive class tensions in France and across Europe. Two-thirds of the French people say that class struggle is a daily reality of life. At the same time, voters say their main concerns are not terrorism, but social issues like jobs, wages and social conditions.

The programs of the main candidates—which include calls for mass job cuts, tens of billions of euros in austerity measures, military spending increases, and a return to the draft—make clear that the ruling class totally opposes these demands. There are also fears that financial markets could react to a surprise election result with a crash wiping out trillions of dollars in paper wealth.

With the election outcome still in the balance, the French financial aristocracy aims to fill the airwaves with law-and-order, anti-Muslim propaganda in the final hours of the campaign.

It relies critically on the cowardice of what passes for the “left” in France, which accepted official claims that the Champs-Élysées attack is merely the outcome of a series of police errors,

though each error is so grotesque as to defy belief. Mélenchon himself reacted by declaring his “personal solidarity” with Le Pen, Fillon, and Macron on Twitter.

A precursor of today’s situation in France is Italy’s “Years of Lead,” in the 1970s and 1980s, when the state responded to popular radicalization and mass class struggles by letting far-right terrorists tied to Italian intelligence mount attacks they blamed on left-wing groups. These attacks included the murder of three *Carabinieri* police in the Peteano car bombing of 1972, and the 1980 bombing of the Central Station in Bologna.

Several far-right terrorists involved in this “strategy of tension” were caught. Judge Felice Casson explained to the BBC that they aimed to “create tension in the country to promote conservative, reactionary social and political tendencies.” One convicted terrorist, Vincenzo Vinciguerra, told the *Observer*: “You had to attack civilians, the people, women, children, innocent people, unknown people far removed from any political game. The reason was quite simple. They were supposed to force these people, the Italian public, to turn to the State to ask for greater security.”

As it seeks to slash workers’ living standards and rearm itself for war, the financial aristocracy is well aware that it faces deep popular opposition. It will stop at nothing in an attempt to preserve its rule.