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France's permanent state of emergency

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21 July 2016

At 4:53 AM Wednesday, the French National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to extend for a fourth time the state of emergency imposed by the Socialist Party (PS) government after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris. By 489 to 26, it prolonged what has become the longest state of emergency in France since the collapse of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime at the end of World War II.

Official claims that this is a temporary response to the latest horrific attack in France—in which an apparently deranged, indebted Franco-Tunisian truck driver plowed into a crowd celebrating Bastille Day in Nice, killing 84 and wounding over 100—do not hold water. Amid a deep crisis of bourgeois democracy across Europe, the ruling elite, facing seething social tensions, is moving to impose a permanent state of emergency and transition from democratic to dictatorial forms of rule.

On Wednesday, in a lengthy interview with *Le Monde*, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve tried to reassure the public that the state of emergency is a temporary, lawful policy to fight terrorism. “The state of emergency cannot be a permanent state of affairs,” he said, adding: “It is not a state of exception, it is part of the rule of law. The Nice attack shows there can be counterattacks and calls for stepped-up vigilance. It is the imminent character of the danger that justifies prolonging the state of emergency.”

Cazeneuve's reassurances are absurd on their face. All his arguments are intended to justify a permanent elimination of democratic rights. As Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated in the Assembly, the PS insists that France will live in imminent danger of events like the November 13 and Nice attacks into the indefinite future. "Even if these words are hard to say, it is my duty to do so," Valls said. "There will be attacks and there will be other people killed. We must not become accustomed, we must never become accustomed to the horror, but we must learn to live with this menace."

If the PS claims the terror threat is eternal, the inescapable conclusion is that the PS supports an eternal state of emergency. Indeed, various press commentators have written that it will be impossible to lift the state of emergency next winter, when the six months expire. They claim it will have to be prolonged for at least another six months to protect candidates in the presidential election of April-May 2017.

More fundamentally, Cazeneuve's claims are a political fraud because stopping terror attacks is not the purpose of the government's actions. The state of emergency law was drafted in 1955 to crush an armed insurrection against French colonial rule by the Algerian people that began in 1954, and to limit opposition to the colonial war against the Algerians in the French working class—something it failed to do.

Today, over 60 years later, the main target of the state of emergency is not terrorism, but social and political opposition in the working class.

After the Nice attack, even Valls had to confess that the state's draconian powers under the state of emergency—which allows police to ban social protests, carry out unlimited searches and seizures, censor the press, impose house arrest without trial and set up military tribunals—cannot stop the attacks. These police state measures do nothing to address the root causes of these attacks—NATO's use of Islamist terror networks as tools in the war for regime-change in Syria and the deep social crisis in France.

Rather, as European capitalism sinks deeper into the greatest economic and political crisis since World War II, the ruling classes in countries across Europe are moving to dispense with democratic rights. As workers discover that democracy can be overturned by an arbitrarily imposed state of emergency, the fragile and ultimately unviable character of capitalist democracy is being exposed before millions.

The same day the French National Assembly voted to prolong the state of emergency, the Turkish government imposed a three-month state of emergency amid a broad purge of the military and state apparatus following last week's failed military coup.

In Britain, the referendum vote to leave the European Union has unleashed a massive political crisis. Various sections of the ruling elite are calling for a repudiation of the Brexit vote and trying to purge the base of the Labour Party so as to anti-democratically oust its elected leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and shift Labour's social and foreign policy even further to the right.

The German government, which is remilitarizing its foreign policy in the face of overwhelming popular opposition, is making plans to deploy the army within Germany itself.

The PS government in France has already used the state of emergency to try to crush explosive social opposition to its austerity measures, notably this spring's mass protests by workers and youth against its regressive labor law. It threatened to ban demonstrations outright, trampling constitutionally protected rights to strike and protest. It violently attacked protests with hordes of riot police and helped organize a counter-demonstration by the police union.

The reaction of the French state, especially compared to the previous national states of emergency of the 1950s and 1960s, seems all out of proportion to the terror threat it cites as justification for upending the constitution and suppressing democratic rights.

The longest of the three states of emergency imposed during the Algerian war lasted eight months. These emergencies—as the war began in 1955, after the 1958 coup d'état, and after the failed putsch of the Algiers generals in 1961—came amid a war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and involved the mobilization of millions of soldiers. And while they served to repress working class opposition to the war, the 1958 and 1961 emergencies were also aimed against insurrections by powerful sections of the French armed forces that had international support, notably in the fascist Franco regime in Spain, and felt the government was capitulating to anti-war sentiment in the working class.

Attacks like the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, the November 13 attacks and last week's atrocity in Nice were carried out under unclear circumstances by handfuls of terrorists, most often known to French intelligence. While they claimed a horrific toll of over 200 lives, this pales in comparison to the mass slaughter of the Algerian war. Yet today's state of emergency has already lasted longer, and the PS clearly intends to maintain it into the indefinite future.

What is driving this hysterical, anti-democratic reaction is, in the final analysis, the escalating social and political opposition in the working class. A central task facing workers, as this opposition develops and takes ever more politically conscious form, is the defense of democratic rights against the drive to dictatorship by a ruling class presiding over a bankrupt capitalist order.