

Millions march in France after Charlie Hebdo shooting

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In the midst of a massive security clampdown, millions of people and dozens of heads of state marched in officially sponsored rallies across France yesterday to denounce last week's terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*.

The marches, called amid mounting panic over the attacks and hysterical appeals from France's major political parties and press outlets for national unity, took on a bizarre character. Thousands of police and soldiers were mobilized in Paris alone. Helicopters flew overhead and snipers lined the rooftops as a delegation of nearly 50 foreign heads of state joined the march, while interior ministers of the major powers gathered in Paris to discuss a coordinated escalation of security measures.

While the marches were billed as an event to defend freedom of speech and demonstrate national and international unity in the struggle against Islamist terrorism, the marchers themselves were torn by political conflicts. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who this summer waged a months-long war against the defenseless population of the Gaza Strip that killed over 2,000 Palestinians, marched together with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, the head of the far-right, anti-Russian regime installed in a February 2014 putsch, attended alongside Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who has declared that NATO is pursuing a policy of regime-change to topple the Russian government.

Several heads of French puppet regimes in Africa attended, appealing for stepped-up French or NATO military intervention in their own countries. Mahamadou Issoufou, the president of Niger, told *i-Télé* that it is "urgent" to mount a new NATO war in Libya. "The south of Libya has become a sanctuary for

terrorists, Libya is destabilizing the entire Sahel," Issoufou said.

Malian President Ibrahim Keita thanked French troops for invading his country in 2013 to battle Islamist insurgents.

British Prime Minister David Cameron—whose government is moving ever closer to leaving the European Union (EU) on a right-wing, nationalistic platform—marched with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the foremost advocate of unpopular EU austerity policies that have devastated workers' living standards across the continent.

However, the supposed leader of the "war on terror," the United States government, was not represented. Not only did US President Barack Obama snub the march, but Attorney General Eric Holder, who was in Paris to discuss stepped-up security measures after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, also failed to attend. Some press outlets speculated that Washington intended to punish French President François Hollande for advocating a relaxation of economic sanctions imposed on Russia amid the Ukraine crisis.

As for the French government itself, its appeals for national unity and the defense of freedom were belied by Prime Minister Manuel Valls' bellicose declaration of a "war on radical Islam" as he appealed on Saturday for French citizens to join the march.

In Paris, 1.5 million people marched, while two million marched elsewhere in France, according to official statistics. This included 300,000 in Lyon, 115,000 in Rennes, 100,000 in Bordeaux and 70,000 in Grenoble and St Etienne. Only 60,000 marched in the Mediterranean port of Marseille, France's second-largest city, which also has the largest Muslim population of any French city.

While the millions of people who attended the

marches doubtless sincerely felt shock and horror at the murder of 12 people in *Charlie Hebdo's* offices, they have not had time to reflect on the many political issues posed by the shootings and the response of the Hollande government.

To the extent that broader layers of people do reflect on the issues raised by the shooting, there is widespread unease and even opposition to *Charlie Hebdo's* vicious anti-Muslim cartoons and its support for France's wars overseas.

After a state-mandated minute of silence in public schools in response to the killings, many high school students responded by criticizing the magazine in the press. "I do not like the content [of the caricatures], but I am against the attack," Yacine told *Le Monde*. "But the cartoonists are not innocent in this affair."

"There are faults on both sides," declared Erica, who said she was Catholic. "Taking 12 lives is a crime against humanity," she said, and then added that cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* "looked for trouble."

Allende said the situation was "dangerous," adding, "If they killed *Charlie*, it was because it did not respect religion. They attacked Islam... If *Charlie* keeps it up, the youth here will do something."

Behind the atmosphere of hysteria stoked up by the French political establishment and media is an attempt to impose a definite and reactionary political agenda. In a country that has seen two world wars and numerous revolutionary struggles, the killing of 12 people is being elevated to the level of an unprecedented national tragedy in a bid to revive the flagging fortunes of Hollande, France's most unpopular president since World War II.

By appealing for national unity behind the police and security forces, Hollande is seeking to bolster the credibility of a government despised for its austerity policies, legitimize French participation in the reactionary, Washington-led "war on terror" in Africa and the Middle East, and facilitate right-wing political combinations in a desperate attempt to stabilize the state.

As Hollande's invitation of National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen to the Elysée Presidential Palace on Friday made clear, what is being considered is the further integration of the neo-fascist FN into mainstream French bourgeois politics. This underscores the authoritarian and anti-democratic evolution of

European politics and the necessity for the unification of the European working class across ethnic and religious lines in a revolutionary struggle for socialism.

As masses of people do begin to reflect on the political issues bound up with the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, it will occur to them that the French government itself bears political responsibility. The two Islamist gunmen who carried out the terrorist attack, Said and Cherif Kouachi, are themselves a particularly toxic product of the failure of capitalism to offer any hope to broad layers of the working masses.

Muslim youth suffer from extreme levels of unemployment, as high as 40 percent in some of France's suburbs, where the Kouachi brothers found low-paid odd jobs on the margins of economic life. They face a stream of Islamophobic measures, such as bans on the burqa and Muslim headscarves. These tensions are intensified by French imperialism's abandonment of its previous opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, aligning itself instead with US-led wars from Afghanistan to Libya and Syria and, once again, Iraq.

It is these conditions that lead the most disoriented and backward elements to snap and carry out horrific crimes such as the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting.



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