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France - view from Britain

Terror, cartoons and Islamophobia

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This is a statement from [Socialist Resistance](#) on the murders in France.

Four people were murdered in a Paris supermarket by Amedy Coulibaly because they were Jewish. Said and Cherif Kouachi slaughtered twelve more because they were offended by cartoons hostile to Islam and Muslims published in Charlie Hebdo. These attacks based on hatred of people because of their religion and the views they expressed put the killers squarely on the side of reactionary prejudice and anti-democratic authoritarianism. Al Qaeda have praised the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly for their attempts to silence dissenting views and freedom of religious practice with bullets. These are rights that socialists defend, not least because in the history of our own movement, murder and violence have been used to suppress opinions and a clear commitment to freedom of expression is an essential democratic demand. These concepts may be alien to the Paris murderers, but they are ones that are crucial for us.

The killers were employing one of the oldest methods in the catalogue of marginal terrorist groups, a strategy of tension. Their calculation, along with that of the London bus bombers, was that by carrying out their atrocities in the name of their religion it would provoke a massive reaction by the French and British states which would drive large numbers of people towards radical jihadism. It's an idea the Italian Red Brigades or the German Red Army Faction would have understood. You compensate for the lack of mass support by getting the state to clamp down on people who are sympathetic to some of your central ideas but don't like your methods. The difference is that while the European terrorists claimed to be acting for the working class vanguard, the jihadists have pretensions to represent observant Muslims globally, or at least those who might be interested in the most misogynistic, intolerant, absolutist version of the religion. Socialists reject both the ideology and the methods.

We can safely predict that just as the Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction failed to overthrow capitalism, the co-thinkers of the Paris terrorists will not create a caliphate in Europe or, we hope, anywhere else. They are making the same mistake as everyone else who has thought that social change is possible with a few determined individuals and some weapons. Real social transformation can only be brought about by the involvement of huge masses of people, not by ragbag bunches of losers with AK47s. This is all the more true if the gunmen are offering a world which most of the rest of society finds a barbaric anachronism.

A reactionary unity

The emerging Pegida movement in Germany, Farage and Le Pen have been politically strengthened by these attacks. They will refer to them endlessly in the coming months citing them as proof that their racist, Islamophobic rantings have been vindicated. Coulibaly and the Kouachis were counting on this. They wanted politics in Europe to be divided along racial and religious lines just as much as anyone on the far right. They will have calculated that there would be an increase in racist attacks on mosques and Muslims. It is now the primary responsibility of every socialist, trade unionist and anti-capitalist to be an active opponent of racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. We have to politically and, where necessary, physically defend Muslims and Muslim businesses and religious buildings from attack. We must also say that the threats against Jews, their places of worship and businesses are equally unacceptable.

Coulibaly and the Kouachis may have been trying to make a little bit of history, but they were not doing it in circumstances they had created. The French state has a long history of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racism. It sent thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps, even though the Nazis hadn't asked them to. They drowned Algeria in blood to try to deny it independence and in 1961 Paris police murdered up to 200 Algerians. Since then north African

immigrants have been dumped in massive estates where unemployment, deprivation and police harassment are daily realities. As the French Anti-Capitalist Party comments, all the major political parties share responsibility for this:

“This murderous violence comes from somewhere. It’s created in the heart of the social and moral violence which is very familiar to large numbers of the young people who live on the working class estates. It’s the violence of racism, xenophobia, discrimination and the violence of unemployment and exploitation. This barbarous violence is the monstrous child of the social war that the right and the left are waging in the service of finance. On top of this there are the wars they have started against Iraq, in Afghanistan, Libya, Africa and Syria. There is also the decades long war against the Palestinian people. These are wars, the only purpose of which is to maintain the dominance of the multi-nationals and their right to plunder while empowering the most reactionary fundamentalists.”

Cheap laughs

As if to emphasise the point, the French state chose to head up the march protesting against the attacks with a rogues’ gallery of the governments responsible for war, austerity, the slaughter of Palestinians and journalists and the suppression of free speech. By contrast, the millions who were forced to march a safe distance behind them were expressing a range of sentiments which included sympathy for the victims, a rejection of violence and a rejection of racism. It did not seem that the Front national was in tune with the popular mood.

It is self-evident that the cartoons relating to Islam have given offence to many Muslims. They certainly make unsettling viewing for those of us who see Islamophobia as one of the major political themes of the far right. Our view is that a magazine which presents itself as broadly progressive should not have published content which keyed into that political discourse. Charlie Hebdo’s defenders will point to the fact that it devoted much more space to attacking the bourgeois parties and Catholicism. This may be true, but there seems to have been a tendency to go for cheap laughs at the expense of a group which is already the subject of constant ideological attack in France and this was a serious political mistake despite the strong anti-racist credentials of many of the magazine’s contributors.

Nevertheless we absolutely reject the right of any ideological current to shut down opposing views with violence just as we absolutely condemn Netanyahu for ordering the murders of Palestinian journalists or Obama for using the threat of prison to silence journalists. Socialists must insist that reactionary ideological arguments are defeated and rejected by persuasion, struggle and mass action. As Chris Harman wrote some years ago:

“But socialists cannot give support to the Islamists either. That would be to call for the swapping of one form of oppression for another, to react to the violence of the state by abandoning the defence of ethnic and religious minorities, women and gays, to collude in scapegoating that makes it possible for capitalist exploitation to continue unchecked providing it takes “Islamic” forms. It would be to abandon the goal of independent socialist politics, based on workers in struggle organising all the oppressed and exploited behind them, for a tail-ending of a petty bourgeois utopianism which cannot even succeed in its own terms.”

Radical socialists all across Europe have stood firm against European and United States imperialism every time they have raised the flag of war. We have participated in countless mobilisations against racism and Islamophobia. We will continue to resist our states as they restrict more and more civil liberties. We are also the implacable political enemies of murderers who kill innocent people because of the accident of birth that is religion or how they express their views. Our role is to build mass, anti-capitalist, anti-war parties that will represent all those who reject the hellish type of world the ruling class is building for us.

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