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Danish cartoons controversy

British media campaign's response

- News from around the world -

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The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, a longstanding media reform organisation set up by the unions and the labour movement (including the British journalists' union, the NUJ), explains its position of the Mohammed cartoons controversy. The CPBF has traditionally been supported by many strands of the radical left, including British Fourth Internationalists. We are publishing this statement for the information of our readers.

It is over four months since the Danish daily, Jyllands-Posten, printed twelve cartoons featuring the Muslim prophet Mohammed. The daily published the series of cartoons after Danish author KÅre Bluitgen complained that nobody dared illustrate his book about Mohammed, for fear of death threats similar to that endured by Salman Rushdie.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/cartoon_protests.jpg]

Islamic tradition bars pictorial depictions of the Prophet, although this oft-repeated injunction has on several occasions been breached before without causing controversy. Images circulating on the Internet now show bombs exploding over pictures of the newspaper, and blood flowing over the national flag and map of Denmark. What started out as a Danish journalistic project has now expanded into a global controversy.

The paper's Editor-in-Chief, Carsten Juste, said, 'We live in a democracy. That's why we can use all the journalistic methods we want to. Satire is accepted in this country, and you can make caricatures. Religion shouldn't set any barriers on that sort of expression. This doesn't mean that we wish to insult any Muslims.'

He also said, 'We must quietly point out here that the drawings illustrated an article on the self-censorship which rules large parts of the Western world. Our right to say, write, photograph and draw what we want to within the framework of the law exists and must endure - unconditionally!'

He has now made a qualified apology: 'In our opinion, the 12 drawings were sober. They were not intended to be offensive, nor were they at variance with Danish law, but they have indisputably offended many Muslims for which we apologize.'

European newspapers, governments, the European Union, United Nations and Muslim organisations are now engulfed in the controversy, and the owner of France Soir has sacked the editor for publishing the cartoons.

The case has also been seized on by far-right groups to fuel race hatred, and, whilst certainly some of the papers which published the cartoons are politically conservative, this should not deter freedom of expression groups from stating their own positions clearly.

There are important principles which need to be defended. One of these is that the right to freedom of opinion and expression is a fundamental right that safeguards the exercise of all other rights. It is a critical underpinning of democracy and applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb.

Some of the cartoons published in the Danish paper may well be offensive to many Muslims (and may well be offensive to others, including cartoonists - some of the published cartoons are of poor quality), but charges of offence and blasphemy should not be deployed to curtail freedom of expression. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom's position is that restrictions on freedom of expression which privilege certain ideas or beliefs cannot be justified.

European newspapers are also being put under unacceptable pressures, which can compromise the freedom of the press. Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, said that the dismissal of the editor of France Soir, Jacques Lefranc, 'sends a dangerous signal about unacceptable pressure on independent journalism.'

The IFJ points out, 'Arab-world governments calling for political action against media are guilty of undue interference in the work of journalists'.

Clearly the row over the cartoons has dramatically revealed how fragile some of these important principles are. We need to avoid generating ever-more anger and confrontation in this case, but at the same time restate firmly that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are important foundations of European democratic society and need to be strongly defended.