

Shootings in France reveal explosive social tensions

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In the early morning hours of March 27, a 33-year-old man opened fire at the end of a lengthy municipal council meeting in the western Paris suburb of Nanterre, killing eight local politicians and wounding fourteen others, eight seriously. Richard Durn, a university graduate who had never been able to find a steady job, waited for observers from the public to leave the building, then pulled out an automatic weapon and fired dozens of shots at the 40 officials present.

Four members of the French Communist Party (PCF) died on the spot, as did three from the center-right Union for French Democracy and one representative of the Green Party. One official, who was shot twice while helping to overpower Durn and hand him over to the police, is still fighting for his life in hospital. Durn shouted “Kill me! Kill me!” at the end of his rampage. He committed suicide 36 hours later by jumping from the fourth floor of the Paris police headquarters.

Politicians have responded to the events in Nanterre by increasing calls for tougher measures against violence and claiming that the killings are inexplicable. Much of the commentary has focused on how Durn, who had been undergoing psychiatric treatment, had been authorized to purchase guns and how he managed to commit suicide while in custody. France is less than a month away from the presidential election, scheduled for April 21 and May 5, and the leading candidates have made law-and-order issues and juvenile delinquency a major theme of their campaigns.

The current president, Jacques Chirac, described actions such as Durn’s as inhuman, saying “everything must be done to repress and prevent them.” His main opponent, Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who has also pledged to be “tough on crime,” described Durn’s actions as “absolutely senseless.” Jospin warned against “making an amalgam between this

individual act of madness and the social problems of insecurity.”

The press has been unanimous in endorsing this view. An editorial in the daily *Liberation* asked why such strange behavior as Durn’s had become “one of the forms of destiny today,” answering its own question with the statement, “No one knows.” *Le Monde* claimed that “this explosion of violence in the center of an ordinary municipal meeting has no logical explanation.” The Communist Party daily, *L’Humanite*, described the killings as “an act of murderous madness” and said that Durn’s suicide had deprived the families of the victims of the satisfaction of seeing the killer brought to justice.

Mental instability certainly played a role in last week’s events. Durn, described by his mother as having “no friends,” had been treated for 12 years for depression and had made two attempts to commit suicide. But his feeling of having been “thrown into the dustbin by society,” as he told police, is shared by many young people. For some years now, successive French governments have been reducing the cost to the state and to employers of unemployment insurance and other social benefits. There are now 2,200,000 unemployed in France, 9 percent of the population. In some areas, youth unemployment approaches 50 percent. An estimated 4 million people live in poverty, including many who have jobs, and France has the highest youth suicide rate in Europe.

Outbursts of extreme violence by desperate individuals are associated in France with the United States. But these problems have increasingly surfaced in France as well. Over the last 10 years there have been at least 17 such incidents, often ending with the suicide of the perpetrator. In July 1992, a young worker killed seven people in the factory in Besancon from

which he had been recently fired. He then killed himself. Twelve months later, a member of the gypsy community killed six of his relatives before committing suicide. In September 1995, a 16-year-old killed sixteen people, including three family members, and wounded seven others before killing himself. And last October a railway worker opened fire in the central French city of Tours, killing four people and wounding eleven others. He is currently in prison.

According to several mayors, Durn's targeting of local government officials is symptomatic of worsening relations between the population and elected officialdom across the political spectrum. Stephane Gatignon, PCF mayor of Sevran in Seine-Saint-Denis, a northeast suburb of Paris, was quoted as saying that "for a long time, people have thought that if they complain, they will get what they want.... We are heading for major problems." Gatignon was attacked by a group of youth in January in his locality when he tried to intervene in a dispute between them and a local restaurateur.

Manuel Valls, mayor of Evry in Essonne, a southern suburb of Paris, and a member of the Socialist Party, told *Le Monde* that "More and more people are coming into the office of a councilor very worked up, on the point of getting physical because they have not succeeded in getting some housing allotment or some financial assistance." Claude Pernes, mayor of Rosny-sous-Bois, also in Seine-Saint-Denis, a supporter of the right-wing Liberal Democracy, said, "I recently had a problem with a young girl who is due to give birth. She is homeless; her mother has turned her out. Her companion told me: 'If she gives birth in the street, you will be the first to pay.'"

A more insightful reaction than that of the politicians appeared in *Liberation* last week in a letter from a young person who points out that society itself bears a heavy responsibility for Durn's deadly outburst. "Although Durn was depressed, talking about madness is an easy excuse," wrote Michaël Moretti. "This terrible act does more to shed light on the malaise of a generation that has been sacrificed than all the monotonous speeches of politicians at election time.... Durn, who had degrees in political science and history, lived with his mother on the minimum wage. This situation is not unusual. Those earning the minimum wage, not to speak of young people who are deprived

of even this measure of last resort, experience unimaginable suffering. To exist on the minimum wage is to be denied recognition, to be a second-class human being. We are the first generation since the Second World War to earn less than our parents. Our future is uncertain. The weakening of the individual psyche is the result of all this. The homeless, euphemistically referred to as having no fixed address, get younger and younger. The outlook is bleak. Our future is the destruction of jobs in the public service. Our future is temporary jobs, poorly paid, requiring more and more qualifications. Our future is not to have one. We are living in great pain. Durn's inexcusable act expresses that as well."



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