

Eyewitness to Paris riots charges police with deliberate provocation

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Rioting in Paris suburbs and other urban areas in France entered its second week Friday, as impoverished and angry youth continued to battle police. The fighting has extended to the eastern city of Dijon and the southern port city of Marseilles.

As France's political elite vacillated between empty promises of "action" on unemployment and threats of even more severe repression, a document published on the Internet by the anti-racist site *Les mots sont importants* (lmsi.net—Words are Important) provides an eyewitness account of police provocation on the Chêne-Pointu housing estate. That estate, in Clichy-sous-Bois, a suburb northeast of Paris, was home to the two youths whose electrocution while fleeing police October 27 set off the current wave of unrest.

The Web document alleges that a massive police operation was deliberately designed to exacerbate the conflict with the youth on the estate after initial riots following the deaths of the two teenagers had subsided.

The author of the account, Antoine Germa, a geography and history teacher, prefaces his account by saying, "I have been on several visits to Clichy-sous-Bois since Saturday morning to prepare a series of programmes with a France Inter radio journalist on the situation in Clichy-sous-Bois. The town has been in turmoil since Thursday 27 October.... This is what I saw, heard, understood and was told."

He finds implausible, in the first place, the denial, by Nicolas Sarkozy, France's right-wing minister of the interior, that police were chasing the youth. "Why [would the youths] go into that alley and climb a fence to hide in an EDF [state electricity company] transformer when their estate was close by?" he asks.

That night and the following night saw fierce rioting and battles with the heavily equipped CRS riot police.

However, on October 30, the day of a silent march in

commemoration of the tragic deaths of Zyad Benna and Bouna Traore, mobilised by Muslim groups and the local mosque, "everything seemed calm throughout the day and the forces of the law kept out of sight."

German continues: "On Saturday night, at the end of the fast [of Ramadan], at about 6:30 p.m., 400 CRS and gendarmes came...in cohorts like the Roman legions, at a run, visors down, shields on their arms and rubber and plastic bullet guns in their hands, they went through each street against an invisible enemy. At this time, everyone is eating and nobody is outside. Why this demonstration of force when the streets were particularly calm? 'Police provocation,' reply as one the local people."

The teacher's account continues: "After an hour, a few youth emerge and face up to the police, everyone waiting for the confrontation to start. What sense can we give to this police strategy except the wish to 'mark their territory,' that is to say, to apply an animal and brute version of the return to 'republican order.' " However, Antoine Germa considers that Saturday night was less violent than the two previous nights and that it took an attack on a mosque with tear gas at 9 p.m. Sunday night, for which crime police are the prime suspects, to really relaunch the rioting.

The question that must be asked is: Who ordered the police to intervene and stoke up the anger of the community and to goad the youth into action? Who benefits from such seemingly gratuitous state provocation against the most vulnerable and excluded sections of society? Of course, the political forces that think they stand to benefit are those with a repressive, law-and-order agenda.

There is every reason to believe that Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy is bent on stoking up the revolt of the youth on the suburban council estates ringing Paris.

After widespread criticism—some it from his own party, the ruling Union for a Popular Movement—for his provocative description of the largely immigrant and Muslim youth on these poor, working class estates as “scum” and “gangrene,” which need to be sandblasted away, he defended his stance on November 3.

“What is extraordinary,” he said, “is to concentrate on the words and not on realities.... There is no future for our districts if we do not rid them of the gangs, the black economy, dealing and drug dealers...the two main words are firmness and justice.” He also claimed that the disturbances were “in no way spontaneous” and “perfectly organised.”

Sarkozy made no mention of the poverty and social distress of these estates nor of his government’s cutting of resources: the basic cause of the resentment felt against all representatives of state authority, which his repressive police actions and demeaning language have stoked to fever pitch.

Since the massive incursions by heavily armed riot police, the whole of the northern suburbs of Paris have been hit by disturbances and running battles between the youth and the police.

The night of Sarkozy’s latest remarks marked a sharp escalation of the elemental and destructive anger of the youth. A total of 519 vehicles were torched in Île-de-France, the Paris region, as opposed to 222 the previous night. There were attacks on symbols of state authority: a police station; the Bobigny magistrates’ court, where many arrested youth are appearing; a bus depot in Trappes; a primary school in Stains. Shops, car showrooms, a supermarket and warehouses were also fired and looted.

Highly mobile groups of youth moved, according to reports, to different estates and forced the 1,300 police to spread throughout the area.

In the rest of France, 77 vehicle burnings were reported and skirmishes between youth and the police took place in Dijon estates and in Marseilles.

In the first week of the urban revolt, 135 arrests were made; 27 adults were charged and 16 have been given jail sentences. On Wednesday evening in Bobigny, one young adult was jailed for a month and another for three months. Three others had suspended sentences of six to nine months.

Amar Henni, in charge of a training centre in Essonne, near Paris, told the press: “One day there’s

going to be a general flare-up—when the resentment reaches other than the younger generations.”

Fearing such an eventuality, the editorial of the Socialist Party-oriented *Libération*, which previously had urged caution, threw in its lot with the forces of repression, declaring that the youth’s “violence is only in part an expression of a malaise nourished by exclusion, injustice and poverty.... [T]he power must stay with the law. We cannot abandon whole areas to minority violence that poisons the life of those who live on the estates.”

Meanwhile the right-wing *Le Figaro*, which in a recent editorial mildly reproached Sarkozy for his verbal excesses, featured an article that the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen would entirely endorse. The roots of the problem, it claims “are the consequence of an uncontrolled immigration policy.”

The sharp movement to the right of the French political establishment, under cover of an anti-immigrant hysteria, serves as a warning to the whole working class of ever-increasing attacks on all basic gains and rights.



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