

After 11 days of clashes between youth and police

French government and opposition back intensified repression

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7 November 2005

The anger and frustration of the most oppressed sections of youth that erupted in the form of violent clashes with police in the Paris area last week has now spread to the whole of France. The riots erupted a week ago after police chased youth into an electricity transformer station in Clichy-sous-Bois where two of the youth were electrocuted to death and a third was very seriously injured.

This incident acted as a spark igniting a veritable tinder box of social tensions that have been building up over many years through the neo-liberal policies of successive Left and Right governments. Youth in Clichy-sous-Bois reacted immediately against the police by setting fire to buildings and cars in their neighborhoods. In the following days, youth in surrounding suburbs joined in. Within four or five days, the protests had spread to the entire Paris area and to a number of oppressed suburbs on other areas of the country.

One of the most common manifestations of the confrontations with police has been the burning of cars. In the nights of the previous week, Wednesday saw 150 cars burnt; Thursday: 500 with 80 arrests; Friday 900 cars with more than 200 arrests.

However, last Saturday night, nearly 1,300 cars went up in flames, not to mention numerous public buildings and commercial centers, while police arrested more than 260 youth.

The French press is now reporting incidents in virtually every area of the country. Of the 1,300 cars, more than 540 were set on fire in the provinces. This included Haut-Normandie, 6 cars, Nord-Pas de Calais, 80, Aquitaine, 36, Centre, 33, Pays-de-la-Loire, 38, Bretagne, 30, Lorraine, 25 cars and 5 buses, France-

Compté, 20, Rhone Alpes, 10, Midi-Pyrénées, 50, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 24.

As with the recent riots in Birmingham, England, and Århus, Denmark, and a year ago in Amsterdam, Holland, there has been a systematic campaign both in the French and foreign press to portray the spontaneous outbursts of these oppressed sections of youth as being exclusively a question of immigrants. References to black and Arab youth often with hints of links to terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda have abounded. However, youth of Arab, African and Caribbean origin in France are mainly second- or more likely third-generation immigrants and for all intents and purposes are French.

Furthermore, none of the press refers to the fact that the groups of youth in revolt also comprise not only Arab and black youth but also many poor white youth who share the same oppressed conditions of unemployment and police repression. It is not the youth that are racist, but French employers and the French state that systematically discriminate against Arab and black youth as well as against white youth living in the same depressed suburbs.

That the current revolt takes the backward form of burning and smashing cars and property in these youths' own neighborhoods expresses the deep frustration and lack of perspective among these most vulnerable layers of the working class.

The Socialist Party (PS) and the French Communist Party (PCF) bear the principal responsibility for the complete alienation of these layers of the youth from society. Not only did past "Governments of the Left" introduce the neo-liberal policies now being continued and intensified by the present government of Prime

Minister Dominique de Villepin and his deputy Nicolas Sarkozy, but, as the elected municipal officials in these suburbs, they have overseen the destruction of all the social services in these towns, leaving entire sections of workers and youth to their fate.

There are serious indications that the revolt of the youth in Clichy-sous-Bois was largely aggravated and provoked by the brutal intervention of the paramilitary CRS (Republican Security Companies), gendarmes and police two nights after the deaths of the two youths, Ziad Benna and Bouna Traore (see “Eyewitness to Paris riots charges police with deliberate provocation”).

Sarkozy, the interior minister and head of the police, has spent the last years beefing up police repression and has made a series of provocative visits to poor and oppressed quarters, engaging in hostile confrontations with youth in front of television cameras. Sarkozy has thus openly embraced the politics of anti-immigrant demagoguery in an attempt to steal votes and members for his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party away from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s fascist National Front (FN) and Philippe De Villier’s extreme right-wing Movement for France (MPF).

Sarkozy initially came under attack from the Socialist Party and even members of his own party for having provoked the revolt of the youth by his law-and-order campaign of repression. However, as the full extent of the growing revolt has become apparent, there has been a closing of ranks not only within his own party—notably including Sarkozy’s arch-rival Prime Minister de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac—but also on the part of the Socialist Party.

After making a few perfunctory remarks criticising Sarkozy, Jean-Marc Ayrault, president of the Socialist Group in the National Assembly and Mayor of Nantes, said, “We live in a state under the rule of law—burning a car is not an inconsequential act and should be severely punished.” Ex-Socialist Party minister and presidential hopeful Dominique Strauss-Khan stated, “The number of police in the suburbs has gone down, the groups of police assigned to particular housing estates have been disbanded, efforts at prevention have been canceled and this is the result: more violence than we have ever known.”

The government has ordered the hated CRS into the suburbs, which accounts for the sharp rise in arrests this weekend. On Saturday, the government used seven

helicopters to film and target youth for the intervention of the CRS. A number of UMP deputies as well as some chiefs of police have called for the army to be brought in.

Sunday night, President Chirac, emerging from a Council of Security of the Interior meeting declared that “the priority is the reestablishment of security and public order.” Prime Minister de Villepin, coming from the same meeting, said he would announce new measures Monday and vowed that the government “would speed up the trials and sentencing” of the youth in custody. Already, at least 20 youth were sentenced to terms of up to one year in prison last week.

In the course of last week, the French press cited both UMP and opposition politicians who distanced themselves somewhat from Sarkozy and emphasised that in addition to police interventions, some attention must be paid to the social roots of these riots. Now, only 11 days after the death of the two youth in Clichy-sous-Bois, such sentiments have largely vanished, and the government, with the support of the opposition, is preparing full-scale repression of the riots.



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