

# Unemployed youth clash with police in Paris suburbs

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1 June 2006

Nicolas Sarkozy, France's interior minister, has deployed hundreds of extra police to outlying Parisian suburbs after two nights of conflict between unemployed youth and the authorities.

The centres of Montfermeil and Clichy-sous-Bois were the sites of the bitterest clashes between youth and police since three weeks of rioting in urban suburbs across France in the fall of 2005. Reports indicate that the conflicts were sparked by the provocative actions of the local police and repressive "law-and-order" measures proposed by Montfermeil's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) mayor, Xavier Lemoine. The Gaullist UMP is the party of French President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy.

Tensions have heightened in Montfermeil, a suburban town 15 kilometres east of Paris, since early April when Lemoine enacted measures banning teenagers aged 15 to 18 from travelling unaccompanied in groups larger than three between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m., and requiring those younger than 16 to be accompanied by an adult in public. The measures were overturned in the courts after protests by civil liberties groups.

The immediate spark for the disturbances appears to have been arrests on May 29 carried out in connection with an assault on a bus driver in Montfermeil. According to reports, Mayor Lemoine was present when the assault took place and personally intervened. He later identified some of the suspects.

Some reports cite the arrest of a young man, while others state that the conflict was provoked by the arrest of a Malian woman immigrant on the Bosquets estate whose son was wanted in connection with the incident on the bus. Police reportedly dragged the woman down some steps in front of family members and children.

That night, youth burned cars on the Bosquets estate,

which houses one-third of Montfermeil's population and is 50 percent immigrant. Some 100-150 youth, some armed with baseball bats, fought riot police for more than four hours. Nine police were reportedly injured in the clashes.

A dozen cars, including one police vehicle, were torched. Buildings were petrol bombed and the windows of the town hall were smashed, after which the youth moved on to the mayor's house, which they pelted with bricks. Lemoine told reporters that the youth chanted, "The mayor is a son of a bitch." Police shot rubber bullets into the crowd to disperse the young people.

The next night there were disturbances on a smaller scale in the neighbouring Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, including an attack on the local police station. Four police officers were reportedly injured.

The area was the flashpoint of last year's rioting, when two youths, Zyed Bena and Bouna Traore, were electrocuted while fleeing from the police. At least 13 youth were arrested Tuesday, including 18-year-old Muhittin Altun, who had survived electrocution in October during the same police chase that ended in the deaths of Bena and Traore. Altun was accused of throwing a rock at a police car, but his lawyers have rejected the claim.

Altun, alongside investigating magistrates, had been due to visit Wednesday the electricity substation where his two friends had died and he had suffered severe burns. "He was arrested in front of his home," his lawyer, Jean-Pierre Mignard, explained. "We are stupefied that his arrest is taking place a day before a critical judicial proceeding."

The measures being imposed against youth on the local estates are part of a battery of repressive actions by the UMP government. The pledges made to address

the social causes of last year's riots have come to nothing, while Sarkozy has utilised the disturbances to advance his campaign for the UMP's 2007 presidential nomination on an anti-immigrant, "law-and-order" platform.

Prior to this week's disturbances, Sarkozy was seeking legislation to give local mayors greater powers to deal with unruly youth, thereby encouraging Lemoine's actions in Montfermeil.

The interior minister has appeared alongside the local police and promised to clamp down on any further violence. "I will not allow disorder anywhere in the Republic," he told the police in remarks broadcast by the media. "You must continue to fight delinquency; we are going to really go for it... French people want security, the hooligans must be punished."

Sarkozy rejected any criticism of the police, saying that "by battling delinquency, we have upset some of the delinquents." He raised the question of changing a 1945 law which protects children from adult punishments and announced "initiatives soon so that the question of minors will be posed before French society."

The latest eruption of violence on the outskirts of Paris testifies to the extreme social tensions in the city's impoverished suburbs. The predominantly Arab, black and immigrant areas are marked by mass unemployment, as high as 60 percent for young people in some districts. Residents face widespread police racism and brutality.

The French government seized upon last year's rioting to further its own agenda. Promises by President Chirac and Prime Minister de Villepin of more jobs and better living conditions for residents of the suburbs were used as the pretext for an assault on the conditions of all French workers and youth.

Villepin's proposed "First Job Contract" (CPE), which was to permit companies to fire young workers without cause, was justified on the basis that the measure would encourage employers to hire unemployed youth from the working-class suburbs. The CPE was withdrawn in April, after a three-month protest and strike movement developed in opposition to the legislation.

However, the government retained the "Equal Opportunity Law," which it also passed in response to last year's riots. The "Equal Opportunity Law"

contains a raft of reactionary measures, including a de facto reduction in the minimum working age and permission for employers to have 15-year-olds perform night work. The legislation also encourages police and army training for unemployed youth and strips welfare benefits from mothers if various requirements are not met.

These measures have been combined with ongoing police harassment of unemployed youth in the suburbs, following a three-month state of emergency declared by the government after last year's riots.



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