

As French presidential elections approach

## Massive police mobilisation in central Paris

Stefan Steinberg  
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Hundreds of police and special CRS units fought a pitched battle with youth and commuters at the Gare du Nord in the centre of Paris on Tuesday evening. The confrontation, in which heavily armed police employed tear gas and massive force against travelers at one of France's busiest train stations, was immediately taken up by leading French politicians on Wednesday to elevate the issue of law and order to the centre of debate in the current presidential election campaign.

The incident began at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday when ticket collectors (RATP) stopped a man of African origin for allegedly traveling without a ticket. According to witnesses, some of whom took pictures with mobile phone cameras, the man was brutally forced to the ground by RATP guards, who immediately called for reinforcements. One eyewitness declared that the sequence of events and the brutality used by railway guards and police recalled the way in which Rodney King was mishandled and beaten by Los Angeles police in 1992.

Within minutes, the guards and their detainee were surrounded by a group of commuters who demanded the man be let free. Several of the commuters offered to pay the price of a ticket to secure his release. A short time later, however, large numbers of transport police supported by units of the French riot police CRS arrived to protect the RATP officials from the agitated crowd.

Angered by the massive show of force, some members of the crowd threw projectiles at the police and began shouting, "Police are everywhere, justice is nowhere" and "Down with the state, police and bosses." In a wave of aggression, the CRS units responded by moving against the crowd with tear gas and charging forward with batons. Ordinary commuters were victims of the police actions. Cyril Zidou, a 24-year-old electrician, told reporters he was simply coming home from the gym "when I got gassed." Police units also used dogs to repel the crowd.

A total of 13 people were arrested, and parts of the station were closed for hours as police fought running battles with hundreds of commuters and youth.

The Gare du Nord is an international terminal serving Eurostar passengers travelling to and from the UK, but is also a Metro station and a hub for local train services to poorer Parisian suburbs such as Seine-Saint-Denis, where widespread youth riots against police had taken place in 2005. Those caught up in the melee Tuesday included European tourists as well as Parisians who regularly use the station.

News and media comments have drawn parallels between the

rioting in 2005 and the latest events at the Gare du Nord. In the autumn of 2005, youth set fire to thousands of cars and buildings in poor outer-city "banlieues" on the outskirts of Paris and across France in response to the actions of French police, which led to the deaths of two immigrant teenagers.

According to Paul Bacot, a political scientist at Lyon's Institut d'Etudes Politiques, "Incidents like this reflect a real issue with the police in France. It joins the more serious riots of autumn 2005 and the demonstrations against police at a primary school last year. The police have lost their credibility and reputation. It's a real problem, and it's dangerous for everyone."

There is no doubt that the explosive confrontation at the Gare du Nord expresses deep-seated social tensions in France and in particular widespread anger and discontent on the part of broad sections of the population with the French police. At the same time, the massive show of state force on Tuesday has been immediately exploited by leading French politicians to display their law-and-order credentials and demand increasing authoritarian powers for the French state.

Just one day before the events at Gare du Nord, Nicolas Sarkozy, the presidential candidate of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), stepped down from his office as French interior minister to concentrate on his election campaign.

In his function as presidential candidate, Sarkozy was among the first to respond to the events at the Gare du Nord and defended the actions of the police. Accompanied by 15 policemen in uniform, Sarkozy gave an improvised press conference on a platform—amongst cries of "provocateur" and "fascist" from bystanders.

He made patently clear his advocacy of a French policy of "zero tolerance," whereby petty demeanours are countered by the overwhelming force of the state. According to Sarkozy: "To arrest someone because he is not paying, for years no one cared about this, but it is their [the police's] job to do this." The reaction of commuters on Tuesday, Sarkozy continued, was a result of allowing suburban youth "to do what they like" and he went on to praise the police for imposing "a minimum of order, respect, authority and calm."

He went on to attack Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal, who according to recent opinion polls has closed the gap on her main rival: "If Mme. Royal wants to legalise all the sans-papiers [immigrants without papers], if the left wants to side with those who are not paying their tickets, they have a right to do so, but this

is not my choice.”

During an election meeting in the Paris region, Sarkozy mimicked the late US president Richard Nixon and appealed to the “silent majority”: “Should we accept the sans-papiers, companies making losses and cheaters and just say ‘thank you’?” the UMP candidate exclaimed. “I need the silent France, which constitutes the immense majority, and which must say now: enough is enough.”

Sarkozy’s replacement as interior minister, Francois Baroin, was also quick to comment on the events at the Gare du Nord, which he declared had “got out of hand and transformed into guerrilla warfare, into unacceptable, intolerable violence.”

The heavy-handed and completely unjustified treatment by guards and police of a single immigrant passenger at the Gare du Nord is not an isolated incident. Just one day before, a thousand parents, teachers and students had demonstrated in northeast Paris to protest over police mishandling of an elderly Chinese immigrant who was arrested a few days previously outside their school.

On Tuesday, March 20, police arrested a Chinese grandfather who was going to pick up his grandchildren from school. Unable to produce identity documents, the elderly man was man-handled by police as they sought to arrest him. The police treatment of the man promoted a crowd of onlookers, including parents and children from a nearby infant school, to intervene and prevent the police from taking him away.

One bystander took a video of the incident, which shows police throwing tear gas at the crowd as they fled the scene. One day after, the head of the infant school was taken into custody for seven hours for “affront.”

The state provocation in northeast Paris was one of a number of police “stake-outs” of schools and public institutions aimed at whipping up a climate of fear against France’s immigrant community.

Earlier in the week, an Asian woman was also briefly arrested as she was picking up her niece in another nearby elementary school before people surrounding the scene prompted the police to release her. In total, nine immigrants without proper identity papers were arrested in the vicinity of schools in the same week.

The police crackdown on immigrant workers and youth is entirely in line with the policies of the outgoing interior minister, who unleashed a storm of protest following his recent declaration of intent to establish a ministry of immigration and national identity, should he be elected president. Earlier this month, Sarkozy had made clear that repressive methods to combat immigration would be central to his presidential campaign and future policies. On March 11, he told *Le Figaro* his priority was to “to protect France and its values” and that this required a hard line because, as he went on to stress, “immigration policy is the identity of France in 30 years’ time.”

The speed and brutality of the police intervention on Tuesday night at the Gare du Nord indicates that police units had been put on high alert as part of a deliberate strategy by Sarkozy to polarise the French presidential campaign.

According to the daily *Le Monde*, Sarkozy’s closest collaborator, Patrick Devedjian, “did not hide his satisfaction to see that ‘the issue of security has returned to the heart of the

campaign.’ ”

At the last presidential elections in 2002 similar confrontations between the public and police, together with the shooting of a number of politicians by a crazed gunman, and anti-immigrant provocations were blown out of proportion by the media and politicians in order to create a law-and-order witch-hunt atmosphere. As the 2002 elections entered the final stages, the issue of public security was propelled to the top of the political agenda and was one of the main factors helping secure the passage of the far-right leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, into the second round of the election.

Le Pen’s success in the first round of the 2002 election represented a devastating blow to the candidate of the French Socialist Party, Leonard Jospin, whose own right-wing policies played a decisive role in clearing the way for the National Front candidate. Now there is every indication that Sarkozy aims to preempt any similar rally of support by Le Pen in this year’s election through deliberate and provocative use of the police and state forces—thus enabling him to monopolise the issue of law and order.

The initial reaction of representatives of the Socialist Party was to condemn the violence at the Gare du Nord on Tuesday, while pointing to the increased social tensions underlying such clashes. Ségolène Royal tried to avoid the security issue becoming a major issue in the election campaign. But it did not take long for the Socialist Party candidate to follow Sarkozy’s track. Accused of being soft on security, she replied: “I heard a number of statements by right-wing candidates who are throwing me into the camp of those who are soft on crime and those who think they can ride for free. You know me, that is not my nature.”

In fact, Royal has been instrumental in creating a climate that can be exploited by her right-wing and ultra-right rivals in the presidential elections.

Earlier in the campaign, Royal put forward her own plans for the militarisation of French youth through the setting up of “boot camps” for delinquent youth. She has also expressed her agreement with Sarkozy’s proposals for compulsory civic service for all young people, which could include obligatory military service. And point 54 of her 100-point election program clearly calls for the “creation of a new neighbourhood police force.” In her latest pronouncements, Royal has also sought to outdo Sarkozy’s own brand of virulent nationalism by proclaiming her affinity to the French national anthem and encouraging citizens to fly the French flag in their backyards.

Workers and young people should draw their own conclusions from these recent developments. The latest police actions and provocations in Paris, together with the increasing calls by the leading presidential candidates for a strong state and a strongman to govern an unruly France, are clear indications that traditional democratic norms are no longer tolerable in a country stretched to the breaking point by social and political contradictions.



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