Police maintain their occupation of Paris working class suburb

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy has responded to three nights of anti-police rioting in Paris's impoverished northern suburbs with a massive build-up of the repressive powers of the state.

The rioting began in Villiers-le-Bel when two immigrant boys, Larami (16) and Moushin (15), were killed after a collision with a police car. An occupying force of a thousand police officers will remain in the largely immigrant suburb until Sunday, according to Michèle Alliot-Marie, the minister of the interior. The riot police, deployed since Tuesday, have firearms and are equipped with full riot gear, teargas, flash balls and at least two helicopters with powerful searchlights.

On Thursday afternoon the authorities reported some 60 people being held in custody. Seven have been sentenced on charges related to the rioting. The Pontoise criminal court reported prison sentences ranging from 3 to 8 months for three young adults.

Sarkozy spoke at length on Thursday about the situation in Villiers-le-Bel. In the morning he addressed a gathering of some 2,000 police personnel. In the evening he gave a prime time TV interview, which was also devoted to economic issues.

In his speech to the police, Sarkozy said he wanted the police and gendarmerie to be "the most modern in Europe." He said it was necessary to develop "non-lethal" weapons such as Taser pistols and a new generation of flash balls with a range of 40 metres, and promised to supply helicopters to search for weapons allegedly stashed on the roofs of high-rise flats.

He outlined a vision of a social order maintained by ever-increasing repressive measures, and flatly rejected any conception that poverty and unemployment on the urban council estates housing some 6 million French people were the cause of anti-police riots.

In Villiers-le-Bel, a town of 27,000, 39.5 percent of 16-to-25 year-olds are unemployed.

"What happened has nothing to do with a social crisis," Sarkozy said. "It's got everything to do with a hoodlumocracy." He then indulged in racist scape-goating after the manner of the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen: "There's social discontent, there's immigration which has not been controlled for years, ghettos with people who are not integrated."

He baldly stated that the explosion of anger against the police was the work of "drug dealers." Those who fire at the police, he threatened, "we will track down one by one."

There has been a media campaign asserting that the police are facing urban guerrilla warfare and are constantly under fire. A *New York Times* report claimed that 30 police suffered gunshot wounds. Where the *Times* obtained these figures is, however, not clear.

Sarkozy said 82 police had been injured since the fatal crash and declared that "individuals had shot at the police." He portrayed the police, who routinely brutalize the youth in the immigrant suburbs, as the victims, and the youth as the aggressors.

Sarkozy's line was fully supported by Secretary of State for Town Policy Fadela Amara. "Respect for the police is very important," she said. "We are facing urban, anarchic violence carried out by a minority, which casts opprobrium on the majority. That hard core makes use of the slightest protest to break, burn, smash up everything in the neighbourhood."

Amara is from a working class Algerian family. A Socialist Party member and feminist, she joined Sarkozy's right-wing Gaullist government soon after he was elected president in May.

Sarkozy's use of the Villiers-le-Bel tragedy to boost the repressive powers of the state is a continuation of his policy since he became minister of the interior in the Gaullist government under President Jacques Chirac in 2002.

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A vast array of legislative measures, largely promoted by himself, has granted enhanced powers of surveillance and repression to the state: three immigration laws, the Prevention of Delinquency law, an anti-terror law which involves municipal officials, doctors, social workers and teachers in surveillance and control of the population.

The State of Emergency law was reactivated two years ago, using the 2005 urban youth riots as a justification. Previously utilized in 1955 during the French colonial occupation of Algeria, it was used against French citizens for the first time.

None of these measures received any significant opposition from the Socialist Party, the Communist Party or the unions. Now, these organisations, either explicitly or by default and silence, are doing nothing to defend working class communities from assault by the forces of the state. They have refused to come to the aid of the youth and families of Villiers-le-Bel. None have called for the withdrawal of the 1,000 police.

François Hollande, first secretary of the Socialist Party, said he was against Sarkozy's use of the word "hoodlumocracy" and his dismissal of the social crisis, but went on to fully support the president's build-up of state forces. "We do indeed have gangs which carry out criminal actions and which absolutely must be eradicated," he declared, adding that "all violence must not only be condemned, but punished." Practically every other Socialist Party commentator followed the same line, calling for an increased presence of community police.

The petty-bourgeois left, Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle—LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR), all but ignored the anti-police riot and the massive build-up of the police. Both merely published a few lines on their web sites.

The *Lutte Ouvrière* newspaper published an article complaining that youth could no longer have any "confidence into the authorities, the prefects and the police."

"Undoubtedly," the article continued, "involved in these confrontations was a certain number of small mafia leaders who poison the life of the cities and who were possibly the first to set fire to shops, a library or a school... But this does not explain why hundreds of other youth joined them so rapidly."

The article complains of the miserable social conditions in the suburbs and remarks: "But the use of force and repression will evidently not resolve the basic problems that have caused these dramatic explosions that periodically enflame certain neighbourhoods." It ends by "urgently" calling for more schools and teachers. The state "must give a bit less to the richest and devote the necessary means to make life acceptable in the neighbourhoods."

This could have just as well been published in the Socialist Party or liberal press. There is no call for the withdrawal of the police, nor even a denunciation of the massive police presence.

Four years ago, LO gave much support to Fadela Amara's campaign to ban girls from wearing the Islamic headscarf in school. Thus, it supported a law of the right-wing government which strengthens state discrimination against immigrants.

The LCR was even more canny in its commentary on the Villiers-le-Bel events. Its spokesman, Olivier Besancenot, sent his condolences to the parents of the youth who had been killed and called for an "independent inquiry" into the incident, without specifying how and by whom this inquiry should be set up.

The editorial of the LCR's weekly *Rouge* stated, "[W]e must impose on the government that it establish an emergency plan for the neighbourhoods." It called for "the creation of jobs, more and strengthened social services, guarantees to subsidise organisations which create social cohesion, a halt to identity checks, and the suppression of the BAC (anti-crime squads)."

Like LO, the LCR did not call for the withdrawal of the police force and the mobilisation of the working class to defend the youth and families of the community.

Their mealy-mouthed proposals avoid a political struggle against Sarkozy's government. They disarm the working class as to the dangers to the democratic rights of the entire working population posed by the state repression in Villiers-le-Bel.

Having worked to provide political cover for the trade unions' betrayal last week of the railway workers' strike, they now put forward the illusion that the government can be pressured into a crash programme in favour of the poorest sections of the working class, working thereby to blind the working class to the nature of the Sarkozy regime and the need for an independent political struggle against the entire French ruling elite and bourgeois political establishment—"left" as well as right.

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