France: A sharp increase in police repression

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Since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy to the presidency of the French Republic last May, there has been a tangible rise in the repressive activity and brutality of the police. This is how his right-wing Gaullist government aims to deal with resistance to his programme of destruction of the social and democratic rights of workers, youth and immigrants. In so doing, Sarkozy aims to create the conditions for an increase in the profitability and competitiveness of French big business in the global economy.

This repression has intensified particularly since the betrayal of the rail strike on November 21, which left workers and youth politically isolated and boosted the government's confidence in its ability to intensify its brutal state measures.

The youth revolt in Villiers-le-Bel in the northern Paris suburbs was sparked by the death November 25 of two teenage boys—Larami, 16, and Moushin, 15—in a collision with a police car. This rebellion was subsequently suppressed by the occupation of the area by 1,000 heavily armed police.

Sarkozy asserted at the time, "What happened has nothing to do with a social crisis," and accused the outraged youth of being nothing but criminals and drug dealers. His words echoed Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum, "There's no such thing as society."

The president's remarks were taken to their logical conclusion by Judge Jean de Maillard, vice-president of the superior court of Orléans, and a professor at the Institute of Political Science in Paris. In a statement on the use of firearms against the police, the judge described the youth as potential killers: "I am convinced that up until now we have been lucky that the thugs and future murderers in the suburbs have not yet dared to use their fire power."

Reports of the number of police injured by firearms have varied widely, from President Sarkozy's November 29 TV interview, where he mentioned 3 injured, to the weekly news magazine *Marianne*, which talked of 55. This apparent manipulation of the figures has given a certain currency to highly exaggerated expressions such as "urban guerrilla warfare" to describe the clashes between the youth and the police. It provides as well justification for an increase in the already vast repressive measures of the French state.

Sarkozy's minister of immigration, Brice Hortefeux, has set a target of 25,000 deportations of illegal immigrants, *sans papiers*, in 2007. This, combined with the policy of "chosen immigration" enshrined in the latest Immigration Law, has led to a sharp deterioration of the relations between organisations supporting immigrants and the police. Police visits to the homes of immigrants terrified of being deported have led to suicide attempts, serious injuries and death as the victims have sought to escape.

At a meeting of human rights activists of the *Sans Papiers* support group in Amiens last Thursday, it was reported how the authorities have refused to heed the appeals of organisations such as RESF (Education Without Borders Network) to lessen the impact of police sweeps in immigrant neighbourhoods, which must net over 500 *sans papiers* a week to achieve their yearly target.

Police continue to use violence to break up protests in support of France's 600,000 people living in substandard housing and 86,000 homeless. This became front-page news last Saturday when the association *Les enfants de Don Quichotte* (the Children of Don Quixote) attempted to set up a 250-tent city on the banks of the river Seine next to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. They were protesting against the government's broken promises to provide accommodation for the homeless and rough sleepers, made last year in order to end a similar protest along the Saint Martin Canal.

French people were shocked by television news footage showing the homeless and their supporters being pushed roughly aside by a massive police intervention as soon as they began setting up their tents, causing a supporter to fall into the icy waters of the Seine. The protesters included activists from organisations such as Catholic Aid, and the secular Popular Aid and the DAL (Right to Housing).

The deputy of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) for the Rhône said he was "shocked" and that "cries of despair should be dealt with otherwise than with force." François Hollande, first secretary of the Socialist Party, said of Sarkozy: "Rather than honour his promise, he sends the forces of law and order to punish, hunt down and expel, as if it were possible to push poverty into the margins of society."

Denis Baupin, a Green Paris councillor, deputy mayor to Bertrand Delanoë, the Socialist Party mayor of Paris, declared, "I denounce the incredible violence used by the police to dislodge this beginning of a camp.... The response to the scandal of the lack of housing should not be the police baton, or throwing people into the Seine, but to bring immediate,

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concrete solutions to all people in this emergency."

The hypocrisy of these statements, particularly coming from the Paris "left" officials, is not lost on many of the homeless. Municipalities have the legal right to requisition vacant houses, of which there are thousands in Paris, many of them owned by speculators under conditions of an astronomic rise in the cost of housing in the French capital. But these politicians fear the reaction of the bourgeoisie to this encroachment on their property rights. All of these parties have presided, in national and local government, over decades of degeneration of the housing situation and the growth of homelessness in the Paris region and throughout France.

The ongoing seven-week struggle of students against the law on university autonomy, LRU—which opens higher education to private enterprise and prepares the way for a massive reduction of access to universities—has been subjected throughout to brutal police interventions to smash picket lines, sit-downs and demonstrations. An innovation has been the recourse by university administrators to the use of private security forces, resembling right-wing militias, to intimidate students and university teachers alike.

An account by Alice Verstraeten, an anthropology teacher at Lyon 2 University, of the situation at her university has been circulated widely on student and trade union web sites. It provides an insight into developments experienced at universities all over France. She posted her remarks in response to the lack of coverage of these police-state methods by the mainstream media.

She describes the scene: "For several days the university president has been taking recourse to 'the forces of law and order': private security staff, very young, not officially recognised, arrogant and overwhelmed by events, patrol the university wearing an armband with 'security' written on it. They shout at everyone, address everyone with the familiar 'tu,' and make us justify our presence by showing a 'cumul' card [ID]....

She goes on: "It's worth pointing out that a university is, according to the law, a 'public establishment for scientific and cultural purposes'.... The students demonstrating against the security staff yesterday morning chanted 'Thugs, scum.' Because some of the security staff try to stop the female students in order to chat them up, others got into fights with students the same age as them...."

Nine coach-loads of CRS riot police backed by *Gardes Mobiles* military units had been posted each morning at 7:30 at two of the campuses.

"I was there yesterday morning," Ms. Verstraeten writes. "Two of my female students told me they had been 'molested' by the CRS the day before and wanted me to be a witness. Yes, indeed, they pin them to the ground, they throw them forward, they hit them with batons in the stomach and on the head."

She described another incident: "On the riverside yesterday, two student union leaders (one from Lyon 2 and the other from Lyon 3) were pointed out by plainclothes policemen before being pursued down a nearby street by the CRS. Which means, we can agree, that a previous work of 'intelligence' had been carried out and that these arrests were designed to destroy the student movements."

The two men were taken into police custody and brought before the courts the next day. In a lying press statement, the university president's office claimed that they were "exterior to the university" and that the arrests had been made after disturbances. The teacher affirmed: "Several of us teachers are witnesses to the fact that there were no disturbances and that the demonstration was peaceful."

Alice Verstraeten asks: "If they have indeed been called in by the university president only to allow the students wishing to go to lectures to enter the university, why are they filming them?"...

She says that faced with this situation, "several teachers, including myself, have refused to teach. I refuse to go into a university occupied by the police, gendarmes, private unofficial security staff. I refuse to show my ID in order to go to work. I refuse to be pushed around by the CRS. I refuse to be addressed with contempt by 'tu' by individuals I do not know. I refuse to have to hear a private security person insult one of my colleagues....

She points out that those who continue to teach and attend lectures do so at considerable risk in the case of a fire in the dilapidated buildings, since all the exits have been sealed by the security forces.

She gives vent to the widespread anger of students and teachers: "As far as I know, we are not in a police state. Otherwise they'll have to tell us clearly, because it'll mean the rules have changed. I thought we had the right to strike in this country. I think that what bothers me most is to receive statements from the university president's office asserting that the situation is now 'normal.' *If this situation is normal, I resign.*"

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