

France: Massive police raid on Villiers-le-Bel

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Beginning at 6 a.m. on Monday morning, a force of more than 1,200 police descended on Villiers-le-Bel, a town in the northern suburbs of Paris. Their purported aim was to arrest 38 individuals whom they suspected of having committed acts of violence against the police during the two days of rioting in the town last November 25-26. The rioting followed the deaths of two youths, Larami, 16, and Moushin, 15, who were killed in collision with a police vehicle as they were riding a mini-motorcycle.

Police sources say 35 of the targeted suspects were arrested. Hundreds of police patrolled the area in the evening, fearing an angry reaction from area youth. One of those arrested later in the day was Mamadou, 22, the elder brother of Larami. His mother, attempting to prevent his arrest, is reported to have cried out: “You have already taken one of my sons, you want another.”

Using a special fire- and bulletproof Paris police vehicle—nicknamed “Robocop”—as a control centre, the police from the anti-gang brigade, CRS riot police and other forces made arrests in Villiers-le-Bel and the adjoining municipalities of Gonesse and Sarcelles, where there are also big working class council housing estates with large immigrant populations.

The public prosecutor, Marie-Thérèse de Givry, stated: “I have never seen a police operation of such scope.” She added, “I hope that the inhabitants will understand that we are there to reestablish order and peace.”

A middle-aged man told *Libération*: “Here, everything had quietened down, there was no point coming back and stoking things up.”

Twenty-year-old Mehdi added, “A thousand coming, it’s getting on our nerves. Repression here is explosive...even after 35 arrests there will always be people here to cause havoc.” Another young man agreed: “A thousand police, it’s all a show. It could be adding fuel to the flames.”

At the beginning of December, the police had distributed leaflets offering substantial rewards for information from witnesses of “shots fired at the police.”

The police claim that this had been “fruitful” as had telephone taps. According to *Libération*, police sources had informed the paper that the investigators had set up the operation twice previously but had called it off “in the expectation of new, conclusive information.”

However, the timing of the vast police raid has led to accusations that President Nicolas Sarkozy is attempting to utilise the spectacular action to revive his popularity. His approval rating is at an all-time low—39 percent—and the fortunes of his party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), are failing. He hopes to limit dissension within the party and demonstrate that he is taking things in hand. The UMP is facing a humiliating defeat in the countrywide municipal elections set for March 9 and 16 as resistance to his unfulfilled promises, austerity policies and arrogance grows.

These accusations are substantiated by the fact that the media, including foreign journalists, were already staking out the area with their equipment well before the arrival of the police and before the local authorities had been informed of the operation. The mayor of Villiers-le-Bel, Daniel Vaillant, said that he had only been told of the police operation at 6:02 a.m., after it had commenced. “What astonishes me is that the mayor should be informed after the others, after the media. It’s wrong...justice should not work like this,” he said.

Indeed, the minister of the interior, Michèle Alliot-Marie, in charge of the police, was clearly embarrassed, regretting “deeply that leaks had led to the large media coverage of this operation, because this could have had serious consequences, spoiled its effectiveness and also endangered the security of the police and the journalists.”

Commentators have pointed out that such a media deployment could not have taken place without a tip-off from the most reliable and highly placed authorities.

Former Socialist Party presidential candidate Ségolène Royal called it “a police-media operation.” She added, “When the cameras accompany massive police operations during the period of the municipal elections it’s a way of influencing public opinion, of trying to scare people... The

president of the Republic is back to his old tricks of putting on police security shows, because where he's failing on economic and social issues, he wants to create the impression that he's in control concerning security, which is not the case."

François Bayrou, leader of the right-centrist MoDem (Democratic Movement) party, told the press: "It appears the press was invited... I have always considered that justice should not be accompanied by a media show. Justice is for making arrests and less for propaganda purposes."

The Communist Party (PCF) and the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) emphasised the traumatic effect on the population and also pointed to an attempt to influence the municipal elections. The LCR stated: "Thus, Nicolas Sarkozy, in freefall in the opinion polls—coming up to the municipal elections, which are dangerous for the UMP—is getting back to his basics: the police serving his political show."

Marie-Georges Buffet, PCF national secretary, said: "They put on a show, they could have acted differently." However, not wishing to be accused of opposing police repression, she quickly added that she thought it "right" that the police should make the arrests, but that "normally they do it discreetly."

The accusations of political manipulation by the Sarkozy administration in these events are undoubtedly correct, but more profound questions are at stake. The Villiers-le-Bel riots were the pretext for an enormous beefing up of police equipment and deployment. The government is here issuing a warning of state repression, not only to the youth and families of the deprived urban estates, but also to the ever-broader layers of the population moving into resistance against its attacks on living standards, jobs and social rights. These include railway workers, Michelin workers (who recently retained two managers for two days in order to press for improved redundancy payments), government workers, retail workers and many more.

Sociologist Laurent Mucchielli, interviewed by *Nouvel Observateur*, made the following observation: "In fact, I've never heard of the deployment of 1,000 police to catch 30 suspected rioters, at their homes, at dawn, except perhaps for antiterrorist operations. This makes me wonder if there were not other matters at stake."

At the time of the riots last November, there was talk of urban guerrilla warfare, and much was made of the use of firearms being used against the police. Curiously, at the time, widely varied figures were given of police officers

wounded by gunfire. The same vagueness again emerges three months after the events.

One *Nouvel Observateur* report on February 18 noted: "Ten officers were wounded by bullets fired from shotguns or pump-action rifles, especially on the second night of the riots." *Libération* reports February 18 that, according to the Justice Ministry, 119 officers were hurt in the violence, of which "several dozen had been wounded by bullets and scattershot mainly from shotguns."

Joaquin Masanet, general secretary of the Unsa police union, interviewed in the same issue of *Libération*, said: "More than 150 police officers were hurt in this event, 80 by firearms, five of them seriously." Another report mentions 75 wounded by gunfire.

It is clear that an attempt is being made by the government and the media to characterise social unrest as terrorism and to use the vast panoply of repressive legislation enacted over the past five years against it.

The 2005 urban youth revolt was used as pretext to impose state of emergency laws that had last been used by the French state against the Algerian insurrection against colonial rule. At the time, this turn to police-state methods was not opposed by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party or the trade unions. They did nothing to oppose the occupation of working class neighbourhoods by riot police in 2005 or in Villiers-le-Bel last year.

The Villiers-le-Bel police raid on Monday must serve as a warning that the government intends to meet the rising tide of opposition to the social crisis engendered by its austerity programme with repression and authoritarian methods of rule, and that the trade unions and organisations of the "left" have no intention of mounting an offensive against these methods.



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