

France: Reports of police beatings at March 19 demonstrations

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Reports are emerging on the Internet of massive repressive action by the French riot police (CRS) at the end of the March 19 national demonstrations against the economic crisis and government austerity policies. These actions resemble the “kettling” techniques used by the British police at last month’s G20 demonstration in London that led to the death of Ian Tomlinson, as governments around Europe resort to police-state methods against the growing political opposition of workers and youth.

After the massive March 19th demonstrations against the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy in many French cities, Internet accounts and videos appeared showing widespread police brutalities against demonstrators. These reports have been blacked out by the mainstream media.

Some scenes described overturned cars and burning dustbins on the edge of demonstrations. These were immediately seized upon by police as an excuse for assaults on demonstrators; politicians of the ruling UMP denounced “violent demonstrators” and painted the protests with a “violent” brush.

The most prominent police operation that day, however, was totally unprovoked. It took place at the end of the massive and peaceful march in Paris.

A trap was set at the end of the demonstration to prevent people from leaving the area around the Place de la Nation, where the march ended. This is a large square in southeast Paris, at the junction of half a dozen of the city’s main avenues. The CRS blocked the square for several hours, sealing off the entrances to the Metro. Eventually, 300 people were arrested and 49 charged. Those charged face judicial control, regular registering at the district court, and may not take part in demonstrations. Those who protested their arrest were, more often than not, accused of “rebellion” against the police.

One eyewitness report states, “The demonstration ended between 18.30 and 19.00 at the Place de la Nation. People are happy, there are no problems so far, people are not ready to leave yet, and they officially have the right to be there until 9 p.m. There is music everywhere on the square...a hip-hop concert on the lawn, flags were flapping on the statue at the centre of the square.

“But the atmosphere quickly becomes ominous...dozens of CRS stream towards the square and block all the main roads leading to it, preventing passage. Squads position themselves in the underground, just below the stairs and in the corridors, and from there they shoot tear gas grenades, preventing those who want to leave from getting to the underground. Demonstrators who attempted to walk away through a side road rush back towards the centre of the square, chased by lines of CRS.

“Hooded individuals carrying iron bars throw projectiles at the men in blue [the riot police], but then, a few minutes later, surprise! They fall upon a demonstrator and beat him up before dragging him towards their colleagues who stand in a line a few yards away. A perverse tactic of the plainclothes cops, old as anything, but that always surprises.

“[The square] turns out to be a trap of the first order. While the police clean up the square, many people take refuge on the space at the centre of it around the statue (which represents the ‘Triumph of the Republic’—quite a symbol), hoping to escape arbitrary arrest. But they soon found themselves surrounded, pressed against each other, without any exit, stunned by the police tactics they are witnessing. Among the surrounded people, three men suddenly draw telescopic truncheons and attack a young man who has done nothing, hit him and drag him towards the line of CRS.... Some of the ‘peace keepers’ threaten the crowd with rubber bullets. After more than an hour of being surrounded, the police decide to free the captives, using their truncheons to break up the human chain that

formed around the statue, insulting and checking the identity of each person present, one by one. Those who haven't got papers go straight to the police station."

Police assaults on demonstrators took place around France. At the end of the march in Marseille, a post-graduate student in physics and a chemistry professor were arrested, accused of violence and sent to court. The joint education trade union committee of Marseille denounced the arrests and protested that the two men were demonstrating peacefully, demanding their immediate release.

In Toulouse, a student demonstrator was hit in the face by a rubber bullet and may lose the use of one eye. The attack was condemned by a general assembly of the university staff at Toulouse II University-Le Mirail (which, like dozens of other universities in the country, is on strike).

Similar tactics and brutality are being implemented by police forces throughout Europe. One example of these practices could be seen at the occasion of the G20 summit in London (see "Britain: Calls for public inquiry into police brutality at G20 summit" and "Britain: Third autopsy into G20 victim Ian Tomlinson's death") and of the Nato summit in Strasburg and Kehl (Germany).

The 19 March attacks were an act of political intimidation, directed in particular against the youth (the groups attacked were more often those at the end of demonstrations), and against the democratic right to demonstrate and publicly express contrary opinions. They took place as broader layers of the working class, especially in the private sector, come into struggle and threaten to escape the control of the trade unions, who have over the last decade kept control of workers' struggles in alliance with the French state.

Prime minister Francois Fillon, reacting to the development of more radical actions by workers, such as "bossnappings" by workers facing redundancies, told the media on April 17, "The government doesn't accept either employers or any other official being taken hostage, it is dangerous for the future of our Republican pact." Answering a question about what the government can do in such a situation, he said, "We have given instructions to the prefects [the government representatives at department level] so that they be extremely vigilant, if need be to provide the necessary means of law enforcement...."

Over the past two weeks, the Sarkozy government has presented new laws against "insecurity," blaming "gangs." These would include a three-year prison

sentence for an new offense: "knowingly participating in a group, even temporarily formed, having as an aim to commit voluntary injury against persons and property."

The government also plans a law banning the wearing of "hoods" or "balaclavas" in demonstrations. The law is directly inspired from one passed in Germany in the 1980s that prohibits anyone taking part in a demonstration from making his or her face unrecognisable so as to "prevent [his or her] identity from being established."

In its annual report published April 28, the National Commission on Security Practices, (CDNS) documented and reprimanded, amongst other practices, systematic and unwarranted police detention and use of shackling and of strip-searching, exaggerated use of force, excessive duration of custody, restraining methods that led to the death of several detainees, and insulting and humiliating treatment by police and the Gendarmerie.

The Sarkozy government has initiated the process of abolishing the CDNS, via a law on the constitution voted on June 3, 2008.

An Amnesty International report published on April 2 titled "Public outrage, police officers above the law in France ," expresses concern about the growing police impunity. One Amnesty official declared, "Unlawful killings, beatings, racial abuse and excessive use of force by law enforcement officials are prohibited under international law in all circumstances. Yet in France, reports of such human rights violations are rarely investigated effectively, and those responsible seldom brought to justice." He called the result a "pattern of de facto impunity."

None of the national trade union federations have publicized the March 19 attacks or waged a campaign to oppose them.



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