

Youth protest against French police after fatal scooter chase

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Youth clashes with police, after the death of a 19-year-old and injuring of two other young men January 21 in a police chase in the town of Woippy, north of Metz in the Lorraine region, highlight the growing social tensions in France and throughout Europe.

Though not followed by larger protests at the regional or national level as was the case in Greece last year, or in France in the autumn of 2005, the incidents were widely reported in the European media. The reaction of the political establishment showed that it has given up any pretence of attempting to resolve social problems in deprived areas, in favour of blanket repression.

The young man of 19 died from severe head injuries while apparently fleeing from a police patrol, when the scooter he was driving crashed. Two of his friends, who were riding on the scooter with him according to official claims, sustained serious injuries and were taken to hospital. They were placed in intensive care.

The following evening, a silent march was organised by the boys' families and residents of the area, in homage to the dead youth. Marchers met with detachments of riot police called in from neighbouring Metz. The march was called to a halt as the police retaliated with tear gas against stones being thrown at them. In ensuing clashes between some youth and police, a number of cars and other property were burned and damaged.

Participants in the demonstration expressed their anger at the constant police harassment of youth in the town. Residents reacted with outrage at the police claim that the death and injuries of the youth were due solely to their excessive speed and loss of control of the scooter, and that there had been no contact between it and the police vehicle. An aunt of one of the three youths said she had seen the police car and that it was damaged. This was subsequently vehemently denied by

the state.

One resident said: "The municipal police think they are in Chicago. They've got rubber bullets and drive around in four-wheel-drive vehicles in order to frighten us: not just the youth, actually, but the adults too!"

Police brutality is the subject of rising concern in France. In November 2007 two youths, age 15 and 16, died in similar circumstances in Villers-le-Bel, north of Paris. This sparked off violent youth protests and clashes with police, lasting three days. The two policemen involved in the deaths of these youths were acquitted in October 2009. Ten youths arrested after the clashes received prison sentences of between one and three years last July. In May 2009, two people lost their eyesight during clashes with the police.

In 2005 two teenagers died after a police chase in Clichy-sous-Bois, a town northwest of Paris. This sparked off wave of violent protests in the suburbs of many French towns in October-November of that year. The government of the time under President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose minister of the interior was current president Nicolas Sarkozy, introduced a state of emergency—legislation that had not been used for half a century and was created to deal with the insurgency in colonial Algeria. This legislation gave the army and the police massive repressive powers and was extended for a period of three months.

After this latest police-related death, the official reaction and that of most of the media has been to stress that the youth were acting illegally and insist that the law had to be enforced at all costs, in the end blaming the youth for their own injuries. Behind the official statements lies the need to prevent any discussion about the intensifying social crisis for which the French ruling elite's own policies over decades have been

responsible.

The judiciary, local authorities, government and police unions immediately defended the police, before any serious inquiry had taken place. Heavy emphasis was put on the allegations that the scooter had been stolen, and that the youth had no helmets or lights.

The Metz public prosecutor's statement the next day, apparently based on the reports of the policemen involved, asserted that the police had done their duty without reproach. He denied that there had been any contact between the police and the scooter and opposed the use of the word "chase" to qualify the police action.

François Grosdidier, mayor of Woippy and deputy of the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement, the ruling conservative party), said that the people involved in the violence wanted to make parts of the town no-go zones. He called them "areas of unlawfulness which enable all types of trafficking to prosper." Such rhetoric, also routinely used in Britain, amounts to a blanket declaration that certain neighbourhoods are criminal, justifying police intimidation.

Fadela Amara, state secretary for town policy in the Sarkozy government, defended the police. She told the press, "The police have done their duty, they patrol everywhere." She added, "Evidently, there was no impact [between the police car and the scooter]."

One resident noted that if the three youth were already well known to the local police, as was claimed by various officials, nothing would have been easier than to go to their homes the next morning.

Woippy is situated on the main axis between Metz and Thionville, only a few kilometres from the borders with Luxembourg and Germany. Metz constitutes the southern end of the biggest conurbation in Lorraine. The area between the two towns was home to the bulk of the steel industry of northeastern France, one steel town literally following the other. This area was severely affected by the decimation of the steel industry between the late 1970s and early 1990s and the mass shutdown of industrial sites. Tens of thousands of jobs were lost, and the entire area severely economically and socially damaged.

The present crisis is producing the destruction of more jobs, with no end in sight. Since the beginning of the present crisis in late 2008, the official jobless totals have risen by 33 percent in Lorraine. Many people who had found regular or temporary work on the other side

of the border in Luxembourg, Germany or Belgium are facing layoffs there, and they are now signing on in the job centres in France.

These events are testimony to the fact that social conflicts are rapidly sharpening. Such incidents could take place in all parts of Europe, as the ruling class has no answer to the disastrous social consequences of the economic crisis of its own making, and increasingly resorts to open repression and political venom to justify its rule.



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