

French police use live ammunition against riots over police killings

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Over the last week, two young men were shot and killed while attempting to flee police, in the suburbs of Grenoble and the village of Saint-Aignan in central France. Police have responded to riots provoked by the killings with massive police deployments, firing live ammunition.

Police killed Karim Boudouda, 27, with a shot to the head in front of his home on the night of July 15-16, after a car chase in the neighbourhood of La Villeneuve in the Alpine city of Grenoble in southeastern France.

He was suspected of participating in the armed robbery of a casino. Police claimed to have found a bag in the back of his car containing €20,000 stolen from the casino. Police said they had come under fire from Boudouda's car and had only fired in self-defense.

Police shot Luigi Dequenet—a member of a group of travellers who failed to stop at a police check point—near Saint-Aignan on the following night.

On Sunday, some 50 people from his community attacked Saint-Aignan's police headquarters with hatchets and iron bars. They also cut down trees lining the streets and toppled traffic lights. The mayor of the village told *Libération*: “There was a settling of accounts between vagabonds and the police.”

Two helicopters and 300 law enforcement personnel were sent to the village, whose population is 3,250.

In the Grenoble area, rioting began the night after the shooting. After listening on Friday evening to the prayers of an imam for Karim in the neighbourhood park where he lived, fifty youths attacked bus shelters and a tram with iron bars and baseball bats. According to the police, between 50 and 60 cars were torched that night, as well as machines on a building site and two shops. Some 15 cars burned the following night.

At 2:30 AM on Saturday morning, police again fired live rounds in the La Villeneuve housing estate,

claiming that youths had fired a handgun at them. Subsequently, they claim to have been fired upon each night—and twice on Sunday—though no policeman has been hurt.

Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux went to Grenoble on Saturday. He said he would “reestablish public order and the authority of the state ... by all means necessary.” He added that special police detachments would remain “as long as necessary, and until calm was restored.”

He said, “There is a simple and clear reality in this country: hooligans and delinquents have no future, because the public power always ends up winning.”

Hortefeux made a 15-minute lightning visit of La Villeneuve to threaten quick action: “When I say quick, I mean immediately, that's how we are going to reestablish public order and the authority of the state.”

That night 300 heavily-armed police—including 240 elite anti-terrorist forces—invested La Villeneuve. Street lighting was switched off, and a police helicopter circled overhead, training a searchlight down on the neighborhood. Police forces are scheduled to control the area until at least tomorrow night.

On Sunday, Boudouda's mother appealed for calm and told Agence France-Presse she would fight to bring to light the circumstances of her son's death. She said, “They totally screwed up, the police, they totally screwed up. I am going to see the prosecutor and demand an investigation.”

A woman from the estate told *L'Humanité* that the imam's sermon did not provoke the riot: “Karim Boudouda was from this neighborhood, and the youth who showed their anger do not accept the conditions of the death of their friend.”

The police have arrested 20 people since Friday night. Four people were arrested on suspicion of firing on the

police. On Sunday evening two were still being held, pending charges of attempted murder. Three youth were to appeal before magistrates yesterday on charges of looting shops. Fifteen houses have been searched.

Yesterday *Libération* quoted La Villeneuve residents, “The neighborhood took the death of the young man very badly. They let him die on the ground, they left his body on the asphalt instead of transporting him.” The paper added that it had heard the same complaints over and over in the area: “They came to shoot him down in his neighborhood ... they killed him in front of his mother.”

The police killing of two men—and the permission given to police to fire live ammunition at local residents—are not only an act of aggression against residents of Grenoble and St. Aignan, but a warning to the entire working class. Hortefeux’s “lightning” visit to La Villeneuve underscores the fact that leading government officials treat such areas not so differently from rebellious cities of an occupied country.

This is the politically criminal outcome of the deepening social inequality and the racist, law-and-order rhetoric that now permeates French politics.

Such appeals provided the basis for the media’s embrace of Nicolas Sarkozy, prior to his election as president in 2007—as well as for the campaign of his principal opponent, Ségolène Royal of the *Parti Socialiste* (PS). The political establishment has backed the latest police outrage without flinching. PS spokesman Benoît Hamon criticized the government for appearing “overwhelmed” in the “struggle against insecurity”—that is, for not having deployed enough policemen against the most oppressed sections of the working class.

La Villeneuve is one of many ZUS (Sensitive Urban Zones), socially deprived areas home to 4.5 million people across France. According to a December report of the National Observatory of the ZUS, poverty is continuously increasing in these neighborhoods. Already in 2008, before the onset of the world economic crisis, unemployment in the ZUS among the 18-to-24 age bracket reached 41 percent.

The political establishment has sought to deal with rising discontent at social oppression with police repression, while disorienting other sections of the population with racist appeals against the immigrant suburbs.

In October 2005, Sarkozy’s racist taunts against immigrant youth, whom he called “scum,” were soon followed by the deaths of two young men—Zyad Benna and Bouna Traore—while fleeing police in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. This provoked three weeks of rioting in France’s suburbs. In response, then-President Jacques Chirac imposed a three-month state of emergency, with the support of the establishment “left” parties.

In 2007 two teenagers, Larami and Moushin, were killed in the Paris suburb of Villiers-le-Bel in a collision with police, who fled the scene. This provoked three nights of rioting, during which police claimed they had been fired upon by unidentified gunmen. Youths picked up during the rioting were given stiff sentences in summary trials.

The political establishment’s easy toleration of police killings and martial-law-style mass repression is the product of the reactionary, racist climate promoted in France with the outbreak of the world economic crisis, and of mass social discontent in the population.

Sarkozy responded to mass demonstrations against the bank bailouts of 2008-2009 with proposals to ban the burqa and a racist “national identity” campaign, aimed at dividing the working class along racial and ethnic lines. These campaigns found no real opposition from any section of the political establishment. This has further inflamed racial tensions, with politicians and media personalities notably denouncing non-white members of France’s defeated World Cup football team as “scum.”

As the most recent killings and repression make clear, these initiatives lay the political basis for the officially-sanctioned use of deadly force against discontent in the working class.



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