French police infiltrated protests against Sarkozy austerity program

Anthony Torres
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During the recent strike wave in France against the Nicolas Sarkozy government's austerity measures and pension "reform", demonstrators observed police infiltrating several contingents and carrying out a variety of provocative actions. The police have very conspicuously decided not to deny that they infiltrated the demonstrations.

The dubious role played by some of the rioters in the mass protests has had to be finally acknowledged by the media and leading bourgeois politicians.

A video taken by a Reuters journalist, released on October 16, shows one hooded rioter attacking a store window. "A man tries to stop him, but gets a flying kick in the back by another 'rioter' armed with a cosh [which could be a nightstick used by the police], before being surrounded by four or five hooded persons. A few seconds later, the man responsible for the kicking is filmed dispersing demonstrators with the help of his baton", wrote *Le Monde*.

Le Monde reported on this video in the article "On the web, more and more questions are being raised about 'the police rioters'."

The article is linked to a report by a trade unionist who tells of another police infiltration incident at a demonstration, this time in Lyons, in east-central France.

He explains that his "union secretary was in Place Bellecour [in the centre of Lyons] before the start of the demonstration on October 19 with his firefighter colleagues and groups of young people, when they witnessed verbal and physical aggression against a group of youth by individuals who wore CGT [General Confederation of Labour] union badges.

"The firefighters intervened and managed to tackle the aggressors, with such success that they were surprised to see these individuals take out their police identity cards to defend themselves, as they were a plainclothes police unit from the BAC [Anti-Criminality Brigade]! As a result the firefighters ripped off their CGT badges and told them it would be best for them to quit the scene rapidly, which they did".

These infiltrations had a political goal: to blow the whistle on supposed "rioters" and thus discredit the demonstrations and opposition to Sarkozy's austerity policies. The protests are widely supported in France; at the time of writing, 65 percent of the population in polls support further strikes. By making demonstrators appear to be violent and "out of control", with the aid of the media, the government hoped to turn public opinion against the protesting workers and students.

Some of the demonstrations, such as the one in Lyons, ended with serious acts of vandalism and a wave of arbitrary arrests by the police. Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux replied to criticism of the police by Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Left Party by paying homage to the "very great efficiency" of police officers "faced with rioters", of whom 2,254 have been taken in for questioning since October 12.

Mélenchon created controversy October 24 by officially taking up the comments that had been circulating on the Internet since the October 16 incident. He pointed out the role of Hortefeux in these police provocations, noting "the presence in the

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demonstrations of infiltrators who throw rocks, smash shop windows and then take out their police armbands … Who gives such orders? … I think the interior minister is aware of this".

The police unions criticized Mélenchon's statements. However, Hortefeux will not press charges for these comments, according to Patrice Ribeiro, head of the Synergie police union, as had been demanded by several of the cops' organizations: "The minister believes that it is not opportune insofar as this would give Mr. Mélenchon publicity and the opportunity to bang his drum".

By refusing to bring legal charges against Mélenchon, Hortefeux is at the very least strengthening the suspicion that an inquiry would substantiate Mélenchon's accusations. Former police commissioner Georges Moréas has confirmed on his blog in relation to one of the videos that "it would certainly involve police infiltrated into the demonstrations".

The police unions such as UNSA and SGP-FO do not deny police infiltration in demonstrations. Nicolas Comte, general secretary of the General Police Union (SGP-FO), told the press that "the [police] unions do not deny the presence of plainclothes police in the demonstrations, but judge this to be 'normal and logical'."

Bernard Thibault, the CGT leader, finally issued a statement on the role of the police in the demonstrations. He remarked in a *Libération* interview that "the presence of on-duty police camouflaged with union badges, in Lyons and in Paris, of that there is no doubt.… We have seen police with CGT badges spotted by our people, who take refuge in the hallway of buildings, and finish by being escorted away by CRS riot police."

In fact, there are numerous indications that the unions and the official "left" parties were aware of these police operations from the start. Mohamed Douhane, a leader of the Synergie union, replied to Thibault on France 2 TV: "These methods are known by all union and political leaders, and the fact that some pretend to be unaware of and be offended by this is laughable and pitiful".

French union leaders have given interviews to the press which imply that they collaborate closely with the organs of state repression.

In an October 15 *Le Monde* article headlined, "The truck drivers 'in solidarity with the rest of the population'," the leader of CFDT–Route (French Democratic Confederation of Labour truck drivers' union, allied to the Socialist Party), Maxime Dumont, told a journalist: "These days we have more dialogue with the intelligence services ["*les renseignements généraux*"] than with political leaders!"

In the interview Dumont did not clarify the character of these discussions with the French intelligence services, or what information the CFDT gave about strikers to the state.

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