

France: State-backed police riot signals new lurch to the right

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20 December 2010

The official sanction given by leading French officials to a police riot is a sign of a further turn to right-wing, law-and-order policies by the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. On December 10, 200 police officers rioted outside the Bobigny court of justice in the northeastern Paris suburbs, protesting against the trial of seven of their colleagues for the attempted frame-up of an innocent man.

The *Le Monde* editorial of December 13 gives this account of what can best be described as an orchestrated police riot: “French people could not believe their eyes on Friday evening when they saw pictures of Bobigny court surrounded by police in uniform, lit up by their revolving lights, 200 representatives of order creating disorder in the street, with their sirens blaring. They were protesting against the sentencing of seven of them to up to a year in jail. The court condemned them for having blamed an innocent man for an injury, which had happened to a policeman. The policemen were giving chase to a car thief and, in the heat of the action, had struck a colleague, injuring his leg. Rather than admitting their mistake, they had given a false report of the event.”

Had the man the policemen attempted to frame been found guilty, he could have been sentenced to life in prison.

The attempted police frame-up took place in an area marked by severe social tensions. There are 751 poverty-stricken Sensitive Urban Zones (ZUS) in France, and the Seine-Saint-Denis department around Bobigny has the highest concentration. The National Observatory of ZUS (OZUS) has just reported that, at the end of 2009, 43 percent of young men and 37 percent of young women in these neighbourhoods were unemployed, double the already disastrous national rate for this age group.

As soon as he heard that the policemen had received custodial sentences, Christian Lambert, the recently appointed hardline *préfet* for the Seine-Saint-Denis department, went straight to the indicted policemen’s police station in the department at Aulnay-sous-Bois. He declared, “The wrong they did is undeniable” but that he was “very astonished at the court’s decision.” He also said he “understood” the police protest.

Lambert’s statement was followed by further statements of support by top government officials, which made clear that he had the backing of the executive, that is, of Sarkozy. Brice Hortefeux, Minister of the Interior and one of Sarkozy’s closest political associates, stated that the penalty “can legitimately seem disproportionate in the eyes of the law enforcers.”

Sarkozy has not spoken on the matter, but several deputies of the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) made statements supporting Hortefeux.

This government’s trampling of democratic rights is all the more egregious, in that no one has effectively disputed the court’s finding that the policemen were involved in a serious crime.

The police unions have come out against fundamental norms of adequate proof and the assumption of innocence and attacked the magistrates and judges who apply these principles, whom they regularly accuse of being lax. “This court is well known for concealing the worst ideologists of the excuse culture when it comes to releasing armfuls of drug dealers, robbers, people who’ve committed homicide, etc.,” declared the police union Synergie-Officers.

Jean-Claude Delage, the general secretary of the Alliance police union, complained to the media that “in this court and elsewhere, multiple re-offenders are not sentenced as they should be or go scot-free.”

Magistrates' organizations have protested Horteaux's statements. Interviewed by *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Matthieu Bonduelle, general secretary of the Magistrates Union (SM), castigated Horteaux for "flouting the principle of the separation of powers."

Bonduelle cited section 434-25 of the penal code, which states: "the act of attempting to publicly discredit a judicial decision in such a way as to damage the authority of justice ... is punishable by more than 6 months in jail and a €7,500 fine." However the SM is not considering taking legal action against Horteaux.

Bonduelle added: "It is not the first time Brice Horteaux has taken such positions. In July, a policeman killed a Gypsy and the minister gave [the policeman] his support."

Sarkozy used the killing to launch a wave of deportations of Roma, which was wildly unpopular and attracted condemnation even by European commissioner Viviane Reding. Reding subsequently backed down, however.

Political and media reactions critical to Horteaux's statements have been toothless. None have called for the dismissal of Horteaux or of the police rioters. The message to police forces is that they can brave the authority of the courts with impunity—an essential characteristic of a police state.

Prime Minister François Fillon, speaking to a meeting of *préfets*, asserted that the indicted policemen had committed "inexcusable acts," and that "the honour of the police" demanded "exemplary conduct." However, he spoke from the standpoint of strengthening the police's ability to intervene against the population. He expressed concern that the dispute between the police and the magistrates and judges could lead to the "weakening of the state."

Speaking for the Socialist Party, which has recently issued a document on security criticising Sarkozy for his lack of investment in policing, first secretary Martine Aubry merely declared: "We cannot accept that Mr. Horteaux once again attacks the magistrates for a decision they've taken. You can't make big speeches to the youth that they should obey the law and not respect our country's justice system."

The *Le Monde* editorial declares: "the irruption of the Minister of the Interior in this balanced process, where each can express their point of view, is illegal. The legal code proscribes, it must be repeated, statements

which cast discredit on a judicial decision" It then complains that Horteaux, is untouchable because he is a friend of Sarkozy, and leaves it at that.

The police's ability to run riot without effective opposition from the state or political circles is a sign that the Sarkozy government is returning to the right-wing policies, like the targeting of the Roma, that were temporarily held back during the autumn strikes against pension cuts. The suppression and betrayal of these strikes has allowed the state to return to its police provocations and stoking law-and-order hysteria. The lack of any true left-wing movement and the strangling of working class struggle is the essential pre-condition that allows state lawlessness and attacks on democratic rights to proceed.

The response of the ruling class throughout Europe to the social unrest being created by the economic crisis and austerity measures, drastically reducing the living standards of the mass of the population, has been the turn to police or military state measures: the use of the army in Greece and Spain against striking workers, the massive police repression in Britain of the student demonstrations against huge hikes in university fees, the intervention of riot police against striking refinery workers in France.



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