

Ten years after riots, French police cleared in deaths of Clichy-sous-Bois youths

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Ten years after the electrocution of two suburban youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, during a police chase provoked mass rioting across France, the courts have acquitted the two police officers involved. The ruling highlights the impunity enjoyed by police, on which the Socialist Party (PS) government and the entire ruling class rely ever more, as they seek to rule France through the promotion of law-and-order hysteria.

The court's arguments whitewashing the responsibility of the police are absurd. It ruled that neither Stéphanie Klein, the trainee policewoman manning the phone lines that night, nor Sébastien Gaillemain, who carried out the chase, were "clearly aware of a grave and imminent peril" facing the two youths.

Evidence presented to the tribunal directly contradicts this assertion. When Gaillemain saw that the youth were fleeing into an electric power plant, he said: "If they go in there, their skins will be worthless." Nevertheless, the court ruled that this comment did not show that police knew the teenagers were in mortal danger.

The court even ventured to predict that "if Sébastien Gaillemain had known there was a serious and imminent danger, he would not have failed to react."

As the trial began, the presiding judge Nicolas Léger issued what was effectively a warning, that the proceedings would not be "the trial of the police as a whole, of the 2005 mass riots, nor of political comments of various individuals on these events."

In fact, the justice system did everything it could to prevent the trial of the two policemen from becoming a trial of the police and of the law-and-order policies pursued by both PS and right-wing governments. These policies created the atmosphere of permanent, increasingly militarized confrontation between

suburban youth and police in which the two youth were killed as they fled the police.

The police officer who was in pursuit was clearly conscious of the risk of electrocution facing the two youth but did not try to seek assistance. However, the courts cleared the two police officers, in part, to block discussion of police violence and the growth of widespread opposition to the violence, insults and arbitrary arrests carried out by police in poor and immigrant neighborhoods.

The harassment of youth by the police has become a key element of the law-and-order policy of the PS government of President François Hollande, including appeals to the far right, as it seeks to set up the infrastructure of a police state in France.

The families of the victims vigorously protested the court's ruling. Their lawyer, Jean-Pierre Mignard told the press: "There were signs everywhere saying 'Risk of death,' 'Risk of death' ... They were school kids. In the radio traffic, the policemen even called them 'the kids.' A policeman whose mission is to protect did not have the idea of calling anyone? It is scandalous."

He added, "It is a shocking decision. After 10 years ... there is nothing in the ruling that reflects the work carried out by the plaintiffs. We will not accept such a cavalier disregard for our arguments."

The PS, by its silence, joined in the whitewashing of the police officer's role in the two young men's deaths. Neither Prime Minister Manuel Valls nor Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve saw fit to comment on the ruling.

Neo-fascist circles noisily applauded the verdict. National Front (FN) legislator Marion Maréchal Le Pen declared: "This verdict proves that the scum indeed burned and trashed the suburbs just for the fun of it, and not because of any police brutality."

Christian Estrosi, the conservative mayor of Nice, declared that after the national marches held in January in response to the terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, all criticism of the police was illegitimate. He said, “This case has been hanging over the policemen for 10 years. They have been acquitted today. It is impossible to march on January 11 to applaud the police, the security forces, and the interior security forces, and at the same time to drag them through the mud as they try to reconquer the lost territory of the Republic.”

This remark reflects the perspective of the ruling elite. They look with fear at working class and immigrant districts as “lost territory,” which police must forcibly reconquer by imposing a regime of terror in order to strengthen the authority of the state. In this explosive political context, marked by sharp social tensions across Europe and the deep degeneration of French democracy, the ruling class cannot tolerate any criticism of the police.

The tragic death of Benna and Traoré was a fundamental political experience in France. In response to protests and rioting that spread to suburbs across France—the widest disturbances in France since the 1968 general strike—conservative President Jacques Chirac decreed a state of siege for three months, legally suspending basic democratic rights.

During the 2005 riots, the interior minister and future president, Nicolas Sarkozy, built his reputation on an aggressive promotion of police and law-and-order policies. He promised to clean out “the scum” and “the gangrene” of the projects with a Kärcher high-pressure hose, to deploy permanently 17 squads of CRS riot police and seven mobile brigades in “difficult” areas, and to send plainclothes policemen to identify “leaders, traffickers, and Islamists.”

Mass protests also erupted in 2007 and 2012 after police brutality cases, which were again repressed as in 2005. These events accelerated the state’s preparations to undermine fundamental democratic rights in France and impose a police state.

Throughout the world, since the eruption of the 2008 economic crisis, the police have been increasingly militarized and the mass electronic spying on the population is proceeding apace. Enormous social discontent with the policies of austerity and war have, in France, provoked the political collapse of the ruling PS. Its main remaining social base, beyond the banks,

is the police, the army, and the intelligence services—a state of affairs which has emerged ever more openly since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

Under these conditions, where the ruling class feels itself protected primarily through police violence, the capitalist state takes on features of a police state that consciously views the working masses as enemies.

Hollande has deployed 10,000 soldiers on French soil and pushed through a draconian surveillance law that legalizes mass spying by the intelligence agencies. He also promoted the FN, which has support among significant sections of the army and police, by formally inviting their leader, Marine Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace.

The bourgeoisie is preparing for a confrontation with the working class, in particular with immigrant youth. The acquittal of the two policemen is a warning: the courts are giving police a blank check to physically repress workers, including with fatal methods, as was seen by the whitewashing of the deaths of Benna and Traoré.



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